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THE MYSTERY OF M. FELIX.

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AUTHOR OF "GREAT PORTER SQUARE," "DEVLIN THE BARBER," "A STRANGE ENCHANTMENT," "THE DUCHESS OF ROSEMARY LANE," "TOILERS OF BABYLON," ETC.

Book the First.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "EVENING MOON" INDULGES IN A BOMBASTIC RETROSPECT, IN WHICH SOME VERY TALL AND FINE WRITING WILL BE DETECTED BY THE OBSERVANT READER.

"IN pursuance of the policy which we inaugurated some four years since by the romance known as 'Great Porter Square,' we now present our readers with a story of to-day, as strange and exciting as that thrilling mystery, which may be regarded as the starting point of a new and captivating description of journalism for the people. We use the term 'romance' advisedly, and are prepared to justify it, although the incidents which we set before hundreds of thousands of readers were true in every particular, and occurred in a locality with which every Londoner is familiar. We recall with pride the extraordinary variety of opinions which our publication of that story of real life, and the means we pursued to get at the heart of it, elicited. By many we were inordinately praised, by some we were mercilessly condemned. There were critics who declared that it was derogatory to the legitimate functions of a newspaper to present any matter of public interest in the garb in which we clothed it; there were others, who, with a juster sense of the altered conditions of society by which we are ruled, declared that the new departure we made in the 'Great Porter Square Mystery' was, to the general mass of readers, as wholesome as it

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was entertaining. Judging by results, these latter critics were most certainly in the right. The public read with avidity the details of that remarkable case as we published them, in our own original fashion, from day to day. The demand for copies of our several editions was so great that we were unable to satisfy it, and we are afraid that thousands of newspaper readers were compelled to pay exorbitant prices for their copies to the ragamuffins who vend the daily journals in the public streets. We made strong endeavours to put a stop to this extortion, but our efforts were vain, chiefly because the people themselves were content to pay three or four times the established price of the *Evening Moon* rather than be deprived of the pleasure of reading the tempting morsels with which its columns were filled. Letters of congratulation poured in upon us from all quarters, and from that time the success of the *Evening Moon*, as a journal which had firmly fixed itself in the affections of the people, was assured. If any excuse is needed for the system of journalism of which we were the first bold exponents, we might find it in the axiom that the ends justify the means, but we deny that any excuse whatever is required. It was no sentimental experiment that we were trying; we had carefully watched the currents of public opinion, and we started on our crusade to satisfy a need. The present state of society is such that the public insist upon their right to be made acquainted with the innermost details of cases which are brought before the tribunals; the moment these cases come before the courts they are public property. There was a time when secrecy and closed doors were the rule, and under the cloak of that pernicious system the most flagrant wrongs were committed. It is not so in the present day, and it is right that it should not be so. Public matters belong to the people, and so long as a proper and necessary measure of decency is observed, so long as private characters are not defamed, so long as homes and those who occupy them are not made wretched by infamous innuendoes, so long as the pen of the literary journalist is not employed for the purposes of scandal and blackmail—too often, we regret to say, convertible terms—the people's rights in this respect must be observed.

"We point with justifiable pride to the manner in which our example has been followed. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and, we may add, also of approval, and the columns of numberless newspapers with which we have no connection testify to the popularity which our new system of journalism has won. We mention no names, and have no intention of complaining because the credit of initiating the new system has been withheld from us; we accept the compliment, and wish our contemporaries good luck. At the same time we point out to our hundreds of thousands of readers that no journal has up to this day succeeded in presenting public news in as tempting a manner as we are enabled to do. The reason for this lies in the

extraordinary intelligence of our staff. Our writers are picked men, who could earn celebrity in other channels than those of newspaper columns, but who are content to serve us because they are paid as capable journalists ought to be paid, with a liberality which other newspaper proprietors would deem excessive, but which we do not. This is one of the secrets of our astonishing and unprecedented success. Our editors, sub-editors, special correspondents, and reporters are zealous as no others are because they are devoted to our cause, because they have regular and tangible proof that our welfare is theirs, because they share in the profits of our enterprise. Thus it is that we are now in possession of particulars relating to 'The Mystery of Monsieur Felix,' which not one of our contemporaries has been able to obtain, and thus it is that we are enabled to present to our readers a romance as thrilling as any that has ever emanated from the printing press. It presents features of novelty and surprise which can be found in no other *cause célèbre*, and our readers may rest assured that we shall follow up every clue in our possession with an intelligence frequently wanting in the officials of Scotland Yard. And, moreover, we have every right to maintain, and we shall establish the fact, that what we do is done in the sacred cause of justice. The wronged shall be righted, and the mystery clearly brought to light, before we have done with the case of M. Felix.

"For a long period of time the term 'romance' has been misunderstood. Romance was supposed to lie outside the regions of the ordinary occurrences of everyday life. There was a glamour about the word which lifted it above and beyond the commonplace features of human struggle. It was, as it were, a castle built upon an eminence, with spires, and turrets, and gables, whose points shone brightly in the sun; or an ideal garden wherein grew only rare flowers and stately trees; or a land of enchantment peopled by knights in silver armour, and by dainty ladies flinging kisses to their lords and lovers as they rode forth to the tournament or the battle. This was the bygone notion of Romance, the false idea which, thanks in a great measure to our efforts, is now utterly exploded. It has been found and proved that the truest regions of romance lie in humble courts and alleys, where the commonest flowers grow, where the air is not perfumed by odorous blossoms, where people dwell not in turreted castle or stately palace, but in the humblest homes and narrowest places, where common fustian and dimity, not glittering armour and silken sheen, are the ordinary wear, where faces are thin and anxious from the daily cares of toil, and where the battle is not for vast tracts of country worth millions, but for the daily loaf of bread worth fourpence halfpenny. It has been found and proved that the police courts are a veritable hot-bed in which romance is for ever springing up. It would almost seem as if we were living in an age of topsy-turvydom when we contemplate the

shattering of old idols and ideals, but the sober fact is that the world is healthfully setting itself right, and is daily and hourly stripping off the veneer which lay thick upon what have been ridiculously called the good old times. We were the first to practically recognize this truth, and we have done our best to make it popular. It is from lowly annals that we culled the romance of 'Great Porter Square,' and it is from the same annals that we cull the present 'Mystery of M. Felix.' The story will be found as strange as it is true. All the passions of human nature are expressed in it, and there is one episode at least—even up to the point which it has already reached—so singular and startling as to be absolutely unique.

"We draw special attention to the words in our last sentence, 'even up to the point which it has already reached,' and we beg our readers to bear them well in mind. It may be in their remembrance that when we commenced to unravel the mystery of 'Great Porter Square' we had no knowledge of its conclusion. We held in our hands certain slight threads which we followed patiently up, and of which we kept firm hold, until we had woven them into a strand which villainy and duplicity could not break. We championed the cause of a man who, upon no evidence whatever—simply from the officious and mistaken zeal of a few policemen—was brought up to the police court on the suspicion of being, in some undiscovered way, connected with a crime with which all England was ringing. He was remanded day after day for the production of evidence which was never forthcoming, and day after day we protested against the injustice of which it was sought to make him a victim. The slender threads in our possession we held fast, as we have said, until at length we were rewarded with a gratifying success, and brought the guilt home to the guilty parties. We ourselves were misled by the specious statements of one of the miscreants, a woman, we regret to say, who was one of the two principal actors in a plot which was very nearly successful, and which, indeed, did for a certain time succeed. We are in a similar position with respect to the 'Mystery of M. Felix,' but we pledge ourselves to pursue the story to an end, and to unearth what is at present hidden in darkness. Our agents are at work in this country and elsewhere, and we are satisfied that they will succeed in removing the veil from a mystery which is a common topic of conversation and discussion in all classes of society."

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXAMINATION OF CERTAIN DISCREPANCIES IN THE STATEMENTS OF THE THREE PRINCIPAL WITNESSES.

"THE night of the 16th of January will be long remembered. For three weeks the snow had fallen, intermittently, it is true, but for

hours together. The roads were almost blockaded, and traffic was carried on under exceptional difficulties. The season, which in the early part of December had promised to be unusually mild, suddenly vindicated its reputation, and we were treated to an old-fashioned, bitter winter of great severity. On the evening of the 15th of January the frost was most severe, its intensity lasting until some time after daybreak, the thermometer showing at eight o'clock a.m. close upon sixteen degrees of frost. When it began to snow again people congratulated themselves that a thaw was setting in. They were mistaken. Had it been possible the snow would have frozen as soon as it reached the ground, but it fell in too great quantities for such a result. In the evening a piercing wind raged through the thoroughfares, and the snow continued to fall more heavily than during the day. In some places there was a drift almost man high, and our columns on the morning of the 17th recorded the discovery of three lifeless persons, one man and two women, who had been frozen to death during the night. With these unfortunates we have nothing to do; what concerns us and our story is that on the night of the 16th Mrs. Middlemore, a housekeeper in one of the old houses in Gerrard Street, Soho, very imprudently went out just before midnight to fetch her supper beer. Even the raging storm did not prevent her from indulging in her usual habit, the temptation of beer being too strong for her, and the prospect of going to bed without it being too appalling to risk. She saw that the street door was secure when she left the house, and was surprised, upon her return, to find it open. These, and other particulars which will be duly recorded, are statements which have already appeared in public print, and we are not responsible for them. At the moment of her reaching the street door the circumstance of its being open was impressed upon her by the appearance of a man hurriedly leaving the house. He did not stop to address her, and she had no opportunity of asking his business there, because he flew by her 'like a flash of lightning,' she says. Naturally alarmed, she raised her voice and cried, 'Police!' One, Constable Wigg, happened to be not far distant, and he responded to her summons. Having heard what Mrs. Middlemore had to say, he saw that there were two things to attend to—one, to ascertain whether anything had occurred within the house, the other, to follow the man who had escaped from it with such celerity. As he could not fulfil these two duties at one and the same time, he in his turn summoned to his assistance a brother constable of the name of Nightingale. This officer pursued the man, and Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore entered the house.

"Now, with the exception of Mrs. Middlemore, there was only one regular tenant in the house, M. Felix, concerning whom, up to the night of the 16th January, very little appears to be known, except that he was a retired gentleman, living on his

means, fond of pleasure, and of a generous disposition to those who served him well. Mrs. Middlemore speaks in the highest terms of him, but she judges only from one point of view, that of a landlady who has a liberal lodger. She cannot say where he came from, whether he was married or single (the circumstance of his living a bachelor life would not definitely decide this question), or whether he has any relations in any part of the world. There are many gentlemen of the description of M. Felix living their mysterious lives in this great city, a goodly number of them under false names.

"M. Felix was a very peculiar gentleman. He paid for the entire house, although he occupied only three rooms, a sitting-room, a dining-room, and a bedroom. His stipulation when he first entered into possession was that under no circumstances should any other tenant but himself be allowed to occupy a room, and he went so far as to refuse permission to Mrs. Middlemore for any friend of hers to sleep in the house. Her duties consisted in attending to him and to his rooms, which she entered and set in order only when he directed her, and for these slight services she was extravagantly paid. Such a tenant was a treasure, and she appreciated him accordingly, not venturing to disobey him in the slightest particular. He had taken the greatest pains to impress upon her that she was never, under any circumstances whatever, to come to his rooms unless she was summoned, and from what we have gathered of his character, M. Felix was a gentleman who could be stern as well as pleasant, and was not a person who would allow his orders to be disobeyed without making the delinquent suffer for it. These imperative instructions rendered Constable Wigg's course difficult. Mrs. Middlemore had left M. Felix in the house when she went to fetch her supper beer, and it was in the highest degree improbable that he should have quitted it during her absence. He was not a young man, he was fond of his ease, and the storm was raging furiously. Nothing less than a matter of extreme urgency would tempt a man of M. Felix's disposition from his cosy fireside on such a night. Constable Wigg suggested that he should go upstairs to M. Felix's rooms, and ascertain whether he was in and safe, but Mrs. Middlemore would not listen to the suggestion, and of course without her consent Constable Wigg could not carry his proposition into effect. In a casual examination of those parts of the premises which Mrs. Middlemore allowed him to enter, he saw nothing to excite his suspicions, and he decided to wait for the return of Constable Nightingale before he proceeded further.

"We break off here for a moment for the purpose of making brief mention of one or two peculiar features in this singular affair, leaving Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore standing in the passage or the kitchen (they say the passage, we say the kitchen, where doubtless a cheerful fire was blazing; police-

men are human), at half-past twelve or a quarter to one in the middle of the night, waiting for Constable Nightingale to report progress. Curiously enough, the time cannot be exactly fixed, because the kitchen clock had stopped, because Constable Nightingale's watch had stopped also, and because Constable Wigg did not wear one. In an affair of this description it is as well not to lose sight of the smallest details. We arrive at the time, half-past twelve or a quarter to one, approximately. Even in such a storm as was then raging through the streets, Big Ben of Westminster made itself heard, and it transpires from a statement volunteered by Constable Wigg, that the great bell was proclaiming the hour of midnight when, tramping half frozen on his beat, he heard a cry for help. Three times was this cry sent forth into the night, and, faithful guardian as he was, according to his own averment, he endeavoured to ascertain the direction from which the appeal proceeded. It may well be believed that, with the wind blowing seemingly from all points of the compass at once, he failed to make the necessary discovery; but it strikes us as singular that when he was talking matters over with Mrs. Middlemore it did not occur to him that the cry for help may have proceeded from the very house in which he was standing. We make no comment upon this singular lapse of memory. It strikes us also as by no means unimportant that in the statements of Mrs. Middlemore and the two constables there is something very like contradiction and confusion. Mrs. Middlemore gives an answer to a question as to her movements in connection with those of the constables, and presently, being pressed to be definite, says something which throws doubt upon her first answer. She excuses herself by saying that she was upset and worried, but to us this explanation is not satisfactory, if only for the reason that her subsequent correction throws doubt upon certain answers given by the two constables to certain questions put to them. These contradictions, however, may simply point to some dereliction of duty on the part of the constables which they may wish should not be known, and perhaps to some agreement on the part of these three witnesses to an invented story which, believed, would exculpate the constables from any such dereliction. This is mere supposition, and we present it for what it is worth.

"It is difficult to ascertain the precise time at which Constable Nightingale returned to the house in Gerrard Street after his fruitless search for the man who had alarmed Mrs. Middlemore by his sudden rush from the premises. Truly he must have had the greatest difficulty in making his way through the streets. In explanation of our remark that in the statements of Mrs. Middlemore and the two constables there is something very like contradiction and confusion, we append their answers to a few questions put to them. We will deal with Constable Nightingale first:

“When you left the house in Gerrard Street in pursuit of the man which direction did you take?”

“I went in the direction of Oxford Street.”

“That is, you went to the right?”

“Yes.”

“Why not to the left?”

“That would have led me to Leicester Square and Charing Cross.”

“Did you choose the Oxford Street route at haphazard?”

“No.”

“What induced you to take it?”

“I was told by Constable Wigg that the man went that way.”

“Did you meet any person on the road?”

“No one.”

“How long were you engaged upon your search for the man?”

“I can’t exactly fix it.”

“May we say an hour?”

“That would be near the length of time.”

“We will now deal with Constable Wigg:

“How did you summon Constable Nightingale to your assistance?”

“I blew my police whistle.”

“Many times?”

“Not many. He must have been very near.”

“But he did not make his appearance immediately?”

“No; not immediately.”

“Shall we say that two or three minutes elapsed before he joined you?”

“About that.”

“You explained to him what had occurred?”

“Yes, with the assistance of Mrs. Middlemore.”

“You both explained it together?”

“Well, first one spoke, then the other.”

“Did you tell Nightingale that the man had fled in the direction of Oxford Street?”

“No.”

“In point of fact you did not see the man come out of the house?”

“No.”

“And, therefore, could not have given Nightingale the direction?”

“No, of course I could not.”

“Now for Mrs. Middlemore:

“When the man rushed by you from the house, you screamed loudly for the police?”

“As loud as I could.”

“‘How many times did you call?’

“‘I kep’ on calling till Constable Wigg came up.’

“‘He did not come the moment you raised your voice?’

“‘No, not immediate. Perhaps in two or three minutes.’

“‘If we say two minutes we shall be within the mark?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Did you inform Constable Nightingale that the man ran away in the direction of Oxford Street?’

“‘No; I was so flustered that I didn’t see which way he run.’

“These are all the extracts we need give for the purpose of our illustration, merely asking the reader to bear in mind that each witness was examined without the others being present. Is it quite unreasonable to infer that, had they been examined in each other’s presence, their answers would not have been exactly as they are reported in the public prints?

“Constable Nightingale has since given an explanation of this discrepancy by the admission that he must have made a mistake in supposing that he received from Constable Wigg the information of the route the man took when he scurried off; but we submit that this explanation is not satisfactory.

“Another thing. Constable Nightingale states that he was engaged in the search for an hour, and that during the whole of that time he did not meet a single person on the road. How is that statement to be received? He was hunting in some of the busiest thoroughfares in London, and it bears the form of an accusation that he did not for a whole hour observe one policeman on his beat. Were he and Constable Wigg the only two officers in a thronged locality who were faithfully performing their duty? Constable Nightingale distinctly implies as much. We do not wish to be hard on this officer, who bears a good character in the force. His movements and proceedings between the hours of twelve and two on the night of the 16th may have been excusable enough on such a tempestuous night, but we unhesitatingly say that his evidence is supicious, and that we are not inclined to accept it as veracious.

“Still another thing. We have ascertained from persons acquainted with Constable Nightingale that he was very proud of his silver watch, which he was lucky enough to win in a raffle, and that he was in the habit of boasting that it never stopped, and never lost or gained a minute. It is singular, therefore, that on this eventful night it should have stopped for the first time, and at a time when it might be most important to fix the occurrence of events to a minute. Perhaps Constable Nightingale’s watch stopped in sympathy with the stoppage of Mrs. Middlemore’s kitchen clock.

“If any of our readers consider that we are straining too hard on trifles, we reply that the importance of so-called trifles cannot be over estimated. The world’s greatest poet has said, ‘Trifles

light as air are in their confirmation strong as proofs of Holy Writ."

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING PHASE IN THE MYSTERY.

"WE hark back now to the point at which we left Constable Nightingale. He had returned to Gerrard Street without having found the man. During his absence nothing further had occurred to alarm the housekeeper and the constable who kept her company, and they were in doubt as to what was best to be done. There was no evidence that he entered the house with the intention of robbing it, but he might have done so, and being disturbed before he effected his purpose, thought it expedient to make his escape as quickly as possible. They were debating this view when they were startled by what they declare was an 'apparition.' It was the apparition of a half-starved cat, which in some way must have found an entrance into the house before Mrs. Middlemore came back with her supper beer. The cat did not belong to the house, for M. Felix had a horror of such creatures, and would not allow one to be kept on the premises. It was not the cat that startled them, but the colour of the cat, which seemed to have been rolling itself in blood. They saw it only for an instant, and then it disappeared and has not since been seen again; but it left its marks behind it. On the oilcloth were spots of blood, made by the cat's paws. These signs decided their course of action, and they proceeded upstairs to the apartments occupied by M. Felix. They knocked and called out loudly to him, but received no answer. By an ingenious arrangement, devised presumably by M. Felix himself, the keyhole of the door by which they stood was masked by a brass plate, the secret of which was known only to M. Felix. The silence strengthened their apprehensions of foul play, and they determined to force the door open. To effect this it was necessary to obtain the assistance of a locksmith, and Constable Nightingale issued forth once more and brought back with him not only a locksmith, but a doctor in the neighbourhood, Dr. Lamb, who was coming home late from a professional visit. With some difficulty the door was forced open, and the first thing that met their eyes was blood on the floor of the sitting-room. M. Felix was not in this room, but when they entered the bedroom adjoining they discovered him in an armchair, bearing the appearance of a man who had fallen asleep. He was not asleep, however; he was dead. The natural presumption was that he had been murdered, and that the blood on the floor was his, but Dr. Lamb very soon declared that this was not the case. M. Felix was dead, certainly, but his death was produced by natural causes, heart disease.

In this conclusion Dr. Lamb was supported by other medical evidence which was sought on the following day, and this being supposed to be sufficiently established, the necessity of a post mortem was not immediately recognized. The body was lifted on the bed, and there lay, dressed, as it had fallen into the armchair.

"Accounts of these strange occurrences did not appear in the morning newspapers of the 17th January, and the first intimation the public received of them was through the evening papers of that date. Even in this initial stage we scented a mystery, and we despatched our reporters to Mrs. Middlemore to obtain such information as would prove interesting to our readers. Our reporters, however, were not able to see Mrs. Middlemore; neither were they able to obtain access to the house; some absurd police orders were being carried out, which converted the house into a kind of safe. But such ridiculous methods are not difficult to circumvent, and we determined that the public should not be robbed of their privileges. On the 18th January, some 34 hours after the death of M. Felix, we inserted the following advertisement in the first edition of the *Evening Moon*, and repeated it in all our subsequent editions. We printed it in such bold type, and placed it in such a prominent position that it could not fail to reach the eyes of persons who were interested in the case:

"'The Strange Death of M. Felix in Gerrard Street, Soho. Persons who had private or other interviews with M. Felix between the hours of eight in the morning and twelve at night of the 16th of January, or who are in possession of information which will throw light upon the circumstances surrounding his death, are urgently requested to call at the office of the *Evening Moon* at any time after the appearance of this advertisement. Liberal rewards will be paid to all who give such information, and the best legal assistance is offered by the proprietors of this journal, entirely at their own expense, to all who may desire it and who are in any way interested in M. Felix's death.'

"Meanwhile, so far as the police were concerned, matters remained in abeyance. They seemed to do nothing, and certainly discovered nothing. One of our contemporaries, in a leading article, has suggested that the insertion of this advertisement in our columns was an attempt to tamper with justice, or if not to tamper to defeat its ends. We can afford to smile at the insinuation. There was no case before the public courts, and no person was accused of anything whatever in connection with the strange affair. The action we took was taken in the cause of justice, to arouse it to action and assist it. In the lighted torch of publicity there is an irresistible moral force. It would be well if material light were thrown upon the black spaces in this mighty city—the black spaces in which crimes are committed, the perpetrators of which are enabled to escape because of the convenient darkness in which they carry their horrible plans to a successful issue. If old-

time officialism refuses to stir out of the routine of useless and pernicious methods, forces which are not amenable to red tapeism must take into their own hands the plain duties of lawful authority, duties which are neglected and evaded to the injury of society at large. We do not preach socialism, we preach justice—and light.

"Thus far in our narrative we have brought matters up to the night of the 18th January. The house in Gerrard Street is dark and silent; the body of M. Felix is lying on the bed to which it was lifted from the armchair in which it was discovered.

"The night was unusually dark. The snowstorm had ceased on the previous day, and the reflected light of white thoroughfares no longer helped to dispel the pervading gloom.

"The morning newspapers of the 19th contained no items of particular interest in connection with the death of M. Felix. We were the first to announce an extraordinary and apparently inexplicable move in the mystery. In order to do this we published our first edition two hours earlier than usual.

"At nine o'clock on this morning one of our reporters, in the exercise of his duty, was outside the house in Gerrard street, looking up at the window of the sitting-room which M. Felix had occupied. He had exchanged a few words with a policeman in the street.

"*'I am on the staff of the Evening Moon,'* he said to the policeman. *'Is there anything new concerning M. Felix?'*

"*'Nothing,'* replied the policeman, quite civilly, and passed on.

"Our reporter remained outside the house. Patient and persevering, he hoped to pick up some item of interest which he might weave into a paragraph.

"Suddenly the street door was opened from within, and Mrs. Middlemore appeared. Her face was flushed, and in her eyes was a wandering look as she turned them this way and that. The moment our reporter observed these symptoms of distress he came to the conclusion that there *was* some interesting item of which he could avail himself. He stepped up to Mrs. Middlemore.

"*'What is the matter?'* he asked.

"*'He's gone!'* gasped Mrs. Middlemore, wringing her hands. *'He's vanished!'*

"*'Who has gone? Who has vanished?'* inquired our reporter.

"*'Mr. Felix,'* said Mrs. Middlemore in a faint tone.

"*'My good creature,'* said our reporter, *'you must be dreaming.'*

"*'I ain't dreaming,'* said Mrs. Middlemore. *'He's vanished. If you don't believe me, go up and look for yourself. Where are the police? Oh, where are the police?'*

"*'Don't make a disturbance,'* said our reporter soothingly. *'Let us see if you're not mistaken.'*

"Without asking for an invitation he entered the house and

ascended the stairs, followed by Mrs. Middlemore, moaning in a helpless, distracted fashion.

"The door of the sitting-room was open, and also the inner door leading to the bedroom. There was no person, living or dead, in either of the rooms.

"Where was he?" asked our reporter.

"There, on the bed," moaned Mrs. Middlemore. "He was there last night before I locked the door; and when I looked in a minute ago he was gone."

"It was undeniably true. The bed bore the impression of a human form, but that was all. The body of M. Felix had, indeed, disappeared!"

CHAPTER IX.

INTRODUCES SOPHY.

"OUR reporter gazed at the bed in astonishment, while Mrs. Middlemore continued to move her hands and eyes helplessly around and moan for the police. Our reporter is a man of resource, quick-witted, ready-minded, and ever ready to take advantage of an opportunity. He took advantage of this.

"My good creature," he said, "what is the use of crying for the police? Have they assisted you in any way in this mysterious affair?"

"No, they 'aven't," replied Mrs. Middlemore, adding inconsequentially, "but where are they—oh, where are they?"

"What have they done already for you?" continued our reporter. "Brought you into trouble with the newspapers, because of their evidence contradicting yours. It will be best for you to confide in a friend who is really anxious to serve you, and whose purpose is to get at the truth of the matter."

"That's all I want. But where's the friend?"

"Here. I'm on the staff of the *Evening Moon*, which is ready to spend any amount of money in clearing the innocent and bringing the guilty to justice. They haven't any interested motives to serve; they didn't know the dead man, who some people say was murdered and some people say wasn't. If you are an innocent woman you would jump at the chance I offer you; if you're guilty, I wash my hands of you."

"The threat cowed Mrs. Middlemore.

"I'm innocent, you know I am," she gasped.

"Of course I know you are, and I should like the opportunity to silence the wretches who speak of you in a suspicious way."

"What 'ave they said of me? What 'ave they dared to say?"

“What you wouldn’t like to hear; but never mind them just now. We’ll soon take the sting out of their tails. Besides, while you are working in the cause of innocence your time will not be wasted. You will be well paid for the information you give.”

“This appeal to her cupidity settled the point.

“I’ll do it,” she said, “whatever it is. I’m an innocent woman, and I want the world to know it.”

“The world shall know it,” said our reporter, with inward satisfaction at the success of his arguments; “and when the whole thing is made clear through you, you will be looked upon as a heroine, and everybody will be running to shake hands with you. People will say, ‘There, that’s the woman that brought to light the truth about M. Felix. If it hadn’t been for her we should never have known it. She’s a real true woman; no nonsense about her.’ Why, I shouldn’t wonder if they got up a subscription for you.”

“(We have no doubt, when this meets the eyes of our contemporaries, that some of them will be ready to take us severely to task for the tactics adopted by our reporter. Let them. We are thoroughly satisfied with the means he employed, and we offer him our sincere thanks. There is not a move we make in this mystery which is not made in the interests of justice, and that we are not ashamed of our methods is proved by the absolutely frank manner in which we place before our readers every word that passes.)

“What is it you want me to do?” asked Mrs. Middlemore.

“Merely,” replied our reporter, “to answer a few simple questions. I have my reasons for believing that the police have advised you to say nothing to any one but themselves.”

“They ’ave, sir; they ’ave.”

“What better are you off for it? Here are people ready to say anything against you, while you are advised to sit in a corner without uttering a single word in your own defence. Upon my word, my dear Mrs. Middlemore, it’s nothing less than monstrous.”

“So it is,” said Mrs. Middlemore, all of whose scruples seemed to have vanished. “I’ll answer anything you put to me.”

“I shall ask nothing improper. You say that you locked the door before you went to bed last night. Which door? There are two, one leading to the first floor landing, one communicating between the bedroom and sitting-room. Which of these doors did you lock? Or did you lock both?”

“I won’t tell you a lie, sir. When I said I locked the door I thought you’d understand me. I mean that I fastened both of ’em. I couldn’t lock ’em, b-cause the bedroom door key’s been taken away, and the door on the landing’s been cut into.”

“That was done by the locksmith. Who took away the key of the bedroom?”

"'I don't know. Per'aps the police.'

"'How badly they are behaving to you! Anyway, the two doors were closed?'

"'Yes, I saw to that myself. I ain't in the 'ouse without company, don't you think that. I wouldn't stop in it alone if you was to offer me Queen Victoria's golden crown. My niece is downstairs abed, and once she gets between the sheets she's that difficult to rouse that it's as much as a regiment of soldiers can do to wake 'er.' (This, our reporter thought, was comic, implying that Mrs. Middlemore had engaged the services of a regiment of soldiers to get her niece out of bed every morning.) 'Come upstairs by myself in the dark,' continued Mrs. Middlemore, 'is more than I dare do. In the daylight I venture if I'm forced to, as I did a minute or two ago, because, though I shook Sophy till I almost shook 'er to pieces, and lifted 'er up in bed and let 'er fall back again, it 'ad no more effect on 'er than water on a duck's back. All she did was to turn round and bring 'er knees up to 'er chin, and keep 'old of the bedclothes as if she was a vice. She's that aggravating there's 'ardly any bearing with 'er. So as I couldn't get 'er out of bed I come up 'ere without 'er. And that's 'ow I found out Mr. Felix was gone.'

"'You were speaking of what took place last night?' said our reporter. 'Your niece, Sophy, came up with you, I understand? Did she come into this room with you?'

"'No, she didn't. I left her in the passage while I peeped in.'

"'Then she cannot corroborate your statement that the body of M. Felix was here before you went to bed?'

"'Ain't my word enough?'

"'For me it is, but it's different with the police and the public. You are positive the body was on the bed?'

"'If it was the last word I ever had to speak I'd swear to it.'

"'I believe you without swearing,' said our reporter opening a cupboard door.

"'What are you looking in there for?' asked Mrs. Middlemore. 'Do you think a dead man 'd be able to git up and put 'isself on one of the shelves?'

"'No,' said our reporter with a smile, 'but let us make sure that the body is not in either of the rooms.'

"'He looked thoroughly through the apartments, under the bed and the couches, and in every cupboard. Mrs. Middlemore followed his movements with her eyes almost starting out of her head.

"'Even up the chimneys,' he said genially, and he thrust the poker up, and then lit some paper in the stoves to see that the smoke ascended freely and that there was no obstruction.

"'The thought, you put in one's 'ead,' remarked Mrs. Middlemore in a terrified voice, 'is enough to congeal one's blood.'

"'My dear madam,' said our reporter, 'I am only doing what

prudence dictates, so that there may be no possible chance of your getting into trouble. Suppose the body should be found in any other part of the house——

"'But 'ow could it git there?'" interrupted Mrs. Middlemore excitedly.

"'That is more than either you or I can say, any more than we can say how it got out of this room; but out of it it has got, hasn't it?'"

"'Nobody can't say nothink different,' assented Mrs. Middlemore.

"'This is altogether such a mysterious affair,' proceeded our reporter, 'that there is no telling what it will lead to. I don't remember a case like it ever occurring in London before. Suppose the body should be found in any other part of the house, what would the police say? Why, that for some reason or other—and you may be sure they would put it down to a bad reason—you had removed it for the purpose of concealing it.'

"'Me!' gasped Mrs. Middlemore. 'What would I do that for?'"

"'You wouldn't do it at all, but that's the construction the police would put on it, and after that you wouldn't have a moment's peace. My dear madam, we'll not give them a chance to take away your character; not a stone shall be left unturned. There are rooms above these?'"

"'Yes, a lot.'

"'We will have a look through them, and, indeed, through the whole house. It's what the police would do, with the idea that you were a party to some vile plot; it's what I will do, knowing you to be perfectly innocent.'

"He put his design into execution. Accompanied by Mrs. Middlemore, who always kept in the rear, he made a thorough examination of the entire house, from attic to basement, but, as he anticipated, discovered nothing. The last rooms he examined were at the bottom of the house, and it was there he made acquaintance with Mrs. Middlemore's niece, Sophy.

"'Is that you, aunty?'" the girl called out from a room adjoining the kitchen.

"'Yes, it's me,' answered Mrs. Middlemore irascibly. 'You're a nice lazy slut, you are, to be 'ulking in bed this time of the morning.'

"'I ain't abed, aunty,' said Sophy, making her appearance, 'I'm up, but oh, I'm so sleepy!'"

"She came into the kitchen rubbing her eyes and presenting a general appearance of untidiness which did not speak well for her social training. Her short hair was uncombed, her face unwashed, her frock open at the back, and she had no boots on. She stared hard at our reporter, but was not at all abashed at his presence.

"'I'm a friend of your aunt,' said our reporter. 'You had better

finish dressing, light the fire, and give yourself a good wash, and then get breakfast ready. You needn't come upstairs till you're called.'

"He beckoned Mrs. Middlemore out of the room, and they proceeded upstairs to the apartments on the first floor.

"'It will be as well to say nothing before Sophy,' he said. 'Now, if you please, we will go on. It is plain that the body of M. Felix is not in the house; but it must be somewhere. The question is—Where, and how it got there? These rooms were fairly secure before you went to bed last night. Is there a chain on the street door?'

"'Yes.'

"'Did you put it up before you went down to your bedroom?'

"'I puts it up regularly every night.'

"'And you did so last night?'

"'Yes.'

"'And turned the key?'

"'Yes.'

"'Was the door locked and the chain up the first thing this morning?'

"'Yes—no!'

"'What do you mean by that?'

"'I mean I can't remember. I must be sure, mustn't I, sir?'

"'You must be sure; there must not be the possibility of a mistake; this putting up of a chain is one of the points upon which a great deal may hang. Do you mean to tell me that you have any doubt on the subject?'

"'I can't say for certain. I was that upset when I found M. Felix gone that I don't remember nothink till you come up to me at the street door. 'Ow I opened it, or 'ow I got it open, I don't know no more than the dead.'

"'Think a little; it is not longer than half-an-hour since I saw you. Your memory cannot have deserted you in so short a time.'

"'I've got no more memory about it than the babe unborn.'

"'But you must try to have. It is a fact that the chain either was or was not up, that the door either was or was not locked. Sit down and think about it for a minute or two; I will keep quiet while you think.'

"But though the woman obeyed our reporter and sat down and thought of the matter, or said she did, she declared she could make nothing of it, and had to give up in despair.

"'It is awkward,' said our reporter, 'to say the least of it. There is no telling what construction may be put upon your loss of memory.'

"'I'm a honest woman, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore looking imploringly at our reporter; 'you'll put in a good word for me?'

"'You may depend upon that, for I am convinced you are honest and innocent, but it is unfortunate. If you *should* happen

to remember you had best let me know before you tell any one else. Mrs. Middlemore, you go out for your supper beer every night ?'

" 'Yes, every night ; I can't do without it.'

" 'Beer is a wholesome beverage, if taken in moderation, which I know is the case with you. Did you go out for it last night ?'

" 'Yes, I did.'

" 'Before or after you paid your last visit to these rooms ?'

" 'Before, sir. You think of everything.'

" 'It shows that I am doing the best I can for you. Before you came up to these rooms you had your supper ?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Sophy had some with you ?'

" 'Yes. She's got a twist on 'er has Sophy. She eats as much as a Grenadier.'

" 'All growing girls do. How old is Sophy ?'

" 'Fourteen.'

" 'Then, when you went downstairs, you and Sophy went to bed ?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'You both sleep in the same room ?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'In the same bed, most likely ?'

" 'Yes, we do ; and the way that girl pulls the clothes off you is a caution.'

" 'Did you both go to bed at the same time ?'

" 'No. I sent 'er before me, and when I went in she was as sound as a top.'

" 'Are you a sound sleeper yourself ?'

" 'I was before this dreadful thing 'appened, but now I pass the most fearful nights.'

" 'Dreams ?'

" 'Awful.'

" 'How about last night ? Don't answer hastily. This is another important point.'

" Thus admonished, Mrs. Middlemore took time to consider, and no doubt it was with a certain regret that she felt constrained to say, 'I think I must 'ave slept better than ordinary. I was that tired that my legs was fit to drop off me.'

" 'You slept very soundly ?'

" 'I must 'ave done, mustn't I, sir ?'

" 'That is for you to say. You see, Mrs. Middlemore, the body of M. Felix could not have been removed without a certain noise. Now, if you were awake you must have heard it.'

" 'I didn't 'ear nothink. I'll take my Bible oath of it.'

" 'At what hour did you wake this morning ?'

" 'At 'alf-past eight, and I got up at once.'

" 'Isn't that rather late for you ?'

" 'It is, sir, but I've got no one to attend to now.'

"'You were not in any way disturbed in the night?'

"'No, sir.'

"'You positively heard nothing?'

"'Nothink at all.'

"'Did Sophy?'

"'Love your 'eart, sir! Sophy wouldn't wake up if cannon balls was firing all round her!'

"'As a matter of fact, has she told you she heard nothing last night?'

"'I won't say that. I ain't 'ad time to arks her.'

"'I'll ask her myself if you've no objection?'

"They went down together, and Mrs. Middlemore remained outside while our reporter entered the kitchen.

"His entrance aroused Sophy, who had been sitting in a chair, apparently asleep, in the same state of untidiness as he had left her. She fell on her knees with a guilty air and began to rake out the stove, making a great rattle with the poker.

"'Fire not lit yet, Sophy?' said our reporter much amused.

"She looked up with a sly look, and seeing that he was not going to scold her, rubbed her nose with the poker and smiled boldly at him.

"'Not yet, old 'un,' she replied, making no attempt to continue her work.

"To be addressed as 'old 'un' must have been especially humiliating to our reporter, who is a good-looking fellow of eight-and-twenty, but he did not resent it.

"'Wood won't catch, I suppose,' he said. 'Too damp, eh?'

"'Soppin',' said Sophy, though as a matter of fact there was no wood before her.

"'What are you looking so hard at me for?' asked our reporter. 'You'll make me blush presently.'

"'You blush!' laughed Sophy. 'I like that, I do. Look 'ere, old 'un. When yer wants to blush, yer'd better 'ire somebody to do it for yer. I'll do it for tuppence a time.'

"'You would have to wash your face first,' said our reporter, entering into the humour of the situation.

"'I wouldn't mind doing that,' said Sophy, staring harder than ever at him, 'if yer'd make it wuth my while. As for lookin' at yer, a cat may look at a king.'

"'I'm not a king,' observed our reporter, 'and you're not a cat.'

"'Call me one and you'll feel my clors. I'm reckonin' of you up, that's what I'm doing of.'

"'And what do you make of me, Sophy?'

"'I sha'n't tell if you're going to act mean. "'Ansom is as 'ansom does,"'

Our reporter took the hint and gave the girl a sixpenny piece.

"'I say,' cried Sophy, greatly excited as she tried the coin with her teeth. 'Stow larks, you know. Is it a good 'un?'

"'Upon my honour,' said our reporter, placing his hand on his heart with a mock heroic air.

"'Say upon yer soul.'

"'Upon my soul, if you prefer it.'

"'Change it for me, then. I'd sooner 'ave coppers.'

"Our reporter had some in his pocket, and he counted out six into Sophy's grimy palm. A seventh, by accident, fell to the floor. Sophy instantly picked it up.

"'Findin's keepin's,' she said.

"'I'm agreeable. And now, what do you make of me?'

"'Wait a bit,' said Sophy. Unblushingly she lifted her frock and tied the coppers in her ragged petticoat, tightening the knots with her teeth, which were as white as snow. 'That's my money box, and I've got some more in it. What do I make of yer? O, I knows what you are. Yer can't gammon me.'

"'What am I?'

"'Yer belong to the *Perlice Noos*, that's what you do. You've come to make pickchers. Pickcher of the 'ouse where the body was found. Pickcher of the room where the body was laid. Pickcher of the body's bed. Pickcher of the body's slippers. Pickcher of Mrs. Middlemore, the body's 'ousekeeper. O, I say, make a pickcher of me, will yer? I'll buy a copy.'

"'Perhaps, if you're good. But you must answer a question or two first.'

"'All serene. Fire away!'

"'You went upstairs last night with your aunt after you had your supper?'

"'Yes, I did.'

"'You did not go into the rooms?'

"'No, I didn't.'

"'Because you were frightened?'

"'Gammon! It'd take more than that to frighten Sophy.' She added, with a sly look, 'Aunt's easily kidded, she is.'

"'Ah,' said our reporter somewhat mystified, 'then you came down and went to bed?'

"'Yes, I did, and precious glad to git there.'

"'You like your bed, Sophy?'

"'Rather.'

"'And you sleep well?'

"'You bet!'

"'Did you sleep better or worse than usual last night?'

"'No better, and no wus.'

"'Did you wake up in the night?'

"'Not me.'

"'Then you heard no noise?'

"'Where?'

"'Anywhere.'

"'I didn't 'ear nothink. 'Ow could I?'

"'Thank you, Sophy. That is all for the present.'

"'I say,' cried Sophy, as our reporter was about to leave the kitchen, 'yer'll take my pickcher, won't yer?'

"'I'll think about it. I'll see you another time, Sophy; and, look here,' added our reporter, who is never known to throw a chance away, 'here's my card; take care of it, and if you find out anything that you think I would like to know about M. Felix come and tell me, and you shall be well paid for it. You'll not forget?'

"'No, I won't forgit. Anythink at all about Mr. Felix, do yer mean?'

"'Yes, anything.'

"'All right, old 'un. I'll choo it over.' Here Sophy dropped her voice and asked, 'Is aunty outside?'

"'Yes. Can you keep a secret?'

"'Try me,' said Sophy, holding out the little finger of her left hand.

"'What am I to do with this?'

"'Pinch my nail as 'ard as yer can. Never mind 'urting me. As 'ard as ever yer can.'

"Our reporter complied, and Sophy went audibly through the entire alphabet, from A to Y Z.

"'There,' said Sophy, 'did I scream when I came to O?'

"'You did not,' said our reporter remembering the child's game. 'You bore it like a brick.'

"'Don't that show I can keep a secret?'

"'It does. Well, then, don't tell your aunt that I gave you my card or asked you to come and see me.'

"'I'm fly.'

"Giving him a friendly wink, Sophy went on her knees and made a pretence of being very hard at work cleaning the grate. The last words he heard were:

"'Pickcher of Sophy wearin' 'erself to skin and bone. Ain't I busy?'"

CHAPTER X.

OUR REPORTER GIVES MRS. MIDDLEMORE SOME SENSIBLE ADVICE.

"REJOINING Mrs. Middlemore, our reporter informed her that he was satisfied that Sophy had heard nothing in the night.

"'Of course she didn't,' said Mrs. Middlemore. 'Once she's in bed she lays like a log.'

"'She's a sharp little thing,' observed our reporter.

"'Sharp ain't the word, sir. What's going to be the end of her is more than I can fathom.'

"'Has she a mother?'

"'No.'

“‘Father?’

“‘If he can be called one. Drunk ‘arf ‘is time, in trouble the other ‘arf.’

“‘So that poor Sophy has to look after herself?’

“‘Pretty well. She does odd jobs, and picks up a bit ‘ere and a bit there. When M. Felix first come to live ‘ere I’d made up my mind to ‘ave ‘er altogether with me, though she’d ‘ave worried the life out of me, I know she would; but he wouldn’t let me ‘ave nobody in the house but ‘im, and wouldn’t let nobody sleep in it a single night, so I ‘ad to disappoint the child. I did take ‘er in once or twice when she come round to me almost black and blue with the way ‘er brute of a father had served ‘er, but I ‘ad to be careful that M. Felix shouldn’t see ‘er—smuggling ‘er into the kitchen when he was away and letting ‘er out very early in the morning—or I should never ‘ave ‘eard the last of it.’

“‘You are the only friend the girl has, it seems?’

“‘She ain’t got many more.’

“‘Mind what I tell you, Mrs. Middlemore,’ said our reporter, with the kindest intentions, ‘there’s capital stuff in Sophy. Now that M. Felix is gone it would be a charity to adopt her, if you haven’t any of your own.’

“‘I ain’t got none of my own,’ said Mrs. Middlemore, shaking her head dubiously, ‘but since I arksed ‘er whether she’d like to live with me, and she said she would, she’s got into ways that I don’t think I could abide. You see, sir, she wasn’t so old then, and I might ‘ave moulded her. I don’t know as I could do it now.’

“‘What ways do you refer to?’

“‘Well, sir, I’ve seen her selling papers in the streets——’

“‘That’s not a crime,’ interposed our reporter; ‘especially if she does it for food.’

“‘If you won’t mind my saying so,’ said Mrs. Middlemore, with considerable dignity, ‘I consider it low; but that’s not so bad as selling matches, which is next door to begging.’

“‘But she doesn’t beg?’

“‘No, I don’t think she goes as low as that.’

“‘Nor steal?’

“‘No,’ replied Mrs. Middlemore with spirit, ‘she’ll take anythink that’s give to her, but she’s as honest as the sun, I’ll say that of her.’

“‘All that you’ve told me of Sophy, Mrs. Middlemore, is in her favour, and I have already a sneaking regard for her.’

“‘Lord, sir!’ exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, misconstruing the sentiment, ‘and you the gentleman that you are!’

“‘Yes,’ repeated our reporter complacently, ‘a sneaking regard for her. Hawking papers and matches is not the loftiest occupation, but it is a form of commerce, and commerce, my dear madam, has made England what it is.’

“‘It was not entirely without a selfish motive, although he was

truly favourably disposed towards the poor waif, that our reporter wandered for a few moments from the engrossing subject of M. Felix's disappearance to the less eventful consideration of Sophy's welfare. By one of those processes of intuition which come to observant men by inspiration, as it were, he was impressed with the idea that Sophy might be useful to him and to us in the elucidation of the mystery concerning M. Felix. We will not weaken the interest of what is to follow by divulging whether this idea was or was not justified by results; our readers will be able to judge for themselves later on.

"I mean to keep Sophy with me," said Mrs. Middlemore, "for a little while at all events, and if she'll only keep away from the theatres I'll do what I can for 'er."

"Does she frequent theatres?"

"Does she?" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, and immediately answered herself after a favourite fashion with certain of her class. "Don't she? Why, she saves every copper she can git to go to the galleries, and when she ain't got no money she 'angs round the stage doors to see the actors and actresses go in and out. I don't believe she could stay away if it was to save 'er life."

"Persons in a much higher social position than ourselves," said our reporter, turning every point to Sophy's advantage, "are in the habit of hanging round stage doors. The Stage is a great institution, Mrs. Middlemore, greater than ever it was before, and is courted—yes, my dear madam, courted—by the highest as well as the lowest in the land, from the Prince of Wales at the top to poor little Sophy at the bottom. Every fresh thing you tell me of your niece makes me think better of her. But let us return to M. Felix. He would not allow you to have any person in the house, you say. What was his motive?"

"I can't say, sir, excep' that he wanted to keep 'isself to 'isself."

"Did you tell him you would feel lonely without a companion?"

"Not me, sir. M. Felix wasn't the kind of gentleman you could cross. He 'ad a way of speaking when he was giving orders you couldn't mistake. His word was lore and he meant it to be. You ain't forgetting, sir, that he was master 'ere?"

"No, I'm not forgetting that. His orders, then, were to be obeyed without question?"

"They was, sir. He ses to me, "When people don't do as I tell 'em, Mrs. Middlemore, I git rid of 'em."

"A very dictatorial gentleman?"

"Only when he was saying, "This is to be," or "That is to be." At other times he was as smooth as marble and always passed a pleasant word."

"He had visitors occasionally, I suppose?"

"O, yes, sir, but I 'ardly ever sor them. Nearly always he let 'em in and out 'isself."

"Were they mostly ladies or gentlemen?"

"'Mostly ladies, sir.'

"'Have any of them been here to see his body?'

"'Not one, sir.'

"'That is strange. He might almost as well have died on a desert island.'

"'Yes, sir. That's the reason why we've been all at sea what to do. There was nobody to give directions.'

"'It is certainly a perplexing situation, unprecedented in my experience. Should you happen to meet any of the persons who were in the habit of visiting him, would you be able to identify them?'

"'I don't think I should, sir.'

"'Supposing that he came by his death in a violent way—I don't say it is so, because the medical evidence does not favour that conclusion—but supposing that this evidence was misleading, and was proved to be so, there is nobody to take up the matter authoritatively, to take measures, I mean, to bring the guilty party to justice?'

"'Nobody, sir.'

"'Only the police?'

"'Yes, sir, only the police.'

"'And all they have succeeded in doing is to make things uncomfortable for you?'

"'Yes, sir,' sighed Mrs. Middlemore, 'that's all they've done. I said to Mr. Nightingale, "A nice friend you've been," I said. I couldn't 'elp saying it after all I've gone through.'

"'Is it Constable Nightingale you are speaking of?'

"'Yes, it is.'

"'Is he an old friend of yours?'

"'He was on the beat 'ere before Mr. Wigg.'

"'Ah; and that is how you got to know him?'

"'Yes.'

"'He knew M. Felix, probably?'

"'Mr. Felix was always friendly with the policemen on the beat.'

"'Sensible man. Tipped them, I daresay.'

"'They'd best answer that theirselves. He never give *me* nothink to give 'em.'

"'What did Constable Nightingale say when you made that remark to him?'

"'Nothink,' replied Mrs. Middlemore with sudden reserve.

"'Surely he must have made some remark to the effect that he *was* your friend, or words bearing the same meaning?'

"'He didn't say nothink.'

"'Our reporter gave up the point; it was his cue to keep Mrs. Middlemore in a good humour.'

"'I'll have one more look in the bedroom,' he said.

"'At first his scrutiny was not rewarded by any discovery, but,

passing his hand over the pillows on the bed, he felt something hard beneath them, and upon lifting them up he saw a six-chambered revolver, loaded in every barrel.

"Lord save us!" cried Mrs. Middlemore, starting back.

"Did you not know it was here?"

"No, sir, this is the first time I ever saw it. I never knew he kept one."

"Do the police know?"

"They didn't mention it, sir."

"Well, we will leave it where it is. Don't touch it, Mrs. Middlemore; it's loaded."

"Before he replaced it, however, he made the following note in his pocket-book:—'A Colt's double-action revolver, nickel plated, six shots, No. 819.' And, unseen by Mrs. Middlemore, he scratched on the metal with his penknife the initial F. Then he looked at his watch and said:

"It is nearly ten o'clock. My advice now is that you go and give the alarm to the police that the body of M. Felix has vanished."

"You'll go along with me, sir?"

"No; for your sake I had better not be seen. Give me two minutes to get away and then go to the police at once. I will come and see you again and help you in every way I can."

"Shaking her hand, and leaving half a sovereign in it, our reporter, accompanied by Mrs. Middlemore, went to the street door and left her standing there."

CHAPTER XI.

THE "EVENING MOON" IS INUNDATED WITH CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BODY OF M. FELIX.

"As was to be expected, the news of the disappearance of the body of M. Felix caused the greatest excitement. In small villages trifling incidents are sufficient to create an interest; in great cities events of magnitude are required to stir the pulses of the people; and in both village and city, to arouse the public from their normal condition of apathy, it is necessary that the incidents must have local colour. Soho was sufficiently central, and sufficiently mixed and mysterious in the character of its population, to fulfil this imperative condition of popularity. Every resident in London knows the locality, and is to some extent familiar with it; it is contiguous to the most fashionable thoroughfares; it is within a stone's throw of theatres of magnificent proportions; it gives shelter to foreign princes deposed for a time from their high estate, and to foreign votaries of vice of both sexes who, being outlaws, cannot pursue their infamous courses in their native

lands. If we were asked which part of London contains the most varied material for the weaving of modern romance we should unhesitatingly point to the region of Soho. A careless stroller through those thoroughfares little dreams of the strange and wondrous life which beats beneath the apparently placid, the undeniably squalid, aspect of this pregnant locality. The elderly woman, poorly clad and closely veiled, who glides past him, is a prominent member of a Royal family who for a long period held the reins of power in one of the greatest European nations; she lives now in a garret upon dry bread and German sausage, and makes her own bread and lights her own fire. Yesterday she wore a crown of diamonds, to-day she wears a crown of sorrow. The attenuated man, whose worn-out garments hang loosely upon his spare body, and who is now studying the *carte du jour* in the window of a low French restaurant, nervously fumbling at the same moment the few loose coins in his pocket, was, in years gone by, one of the greatest financiers in the world. Yesterday he dealt in millions, had scores of carriages and hundreds of servants, paid fabulous prices for rare gems and pictures, and provided funds for mighty wars; to-day he is debating whether he can afford an eighteen penny dinner. The man with an overhanging forehead, who strides onwards with teeth closely set, and the fingers of whose hands are continually clenching and unclenching, is the head of a secret society whose members number hundreds of thousands, and whose deed of blood shall next week convulse the world with horror. We could dwell long upon this fascinating theme, but our business is with M. Felix, and we must not wander from him.

"As we have already stated, we were the first to give the public the intelligence of his strange disappearance, and so intense was the interest the news excited that our printing machines could not supply one-fourth of the demand for the various editions of our journal. The letters we received upon the subject would form a curious chapter in a new 'Curiosities of Literature.'

"Dear sir (wrote one correspondent), 'You speak of the disappearance of the body of M. Felix as an unparalleled incident. Allow me to correct you, and from my own experience to furnish your readers with an identical case. It is now ten years ago since I formed the acquaintance of a gentleman of great attainments and peculiar habits, and whose nationality was always a matter of curiosity with me. He was a wonderful chess player, an accomplished linguist, and his knowledge of the niceties of every new discovery in science was simply marvellous. He had only one failing—he drank and smoked too much. In those days I also was a free liver. We were both single men, I certainly, he presumably; there are topics upon which it is good breeding to preserve a friendly delicacy. We met frequently, and dined together at least twice a week, at my expense. He was a good judge of wine and liquor, and very choice in his food. Being much superior to me

in this respect I invariably left it to him to arrange the courses. Perhaps occasionally we took half a bottle of wine too much, but that is neither here nor there. He took a peculiar interest in all new inventions, and was in the habit of throwing out hints of an extraordinary invention of his own which one day was to revolutionize the world. He told me very little of his discovery of which any one could make use, but he was so jealous of his secret that he bound me down to solemn secrecy on the point; and I trust I am too much of a gentleman to violate the confidence he reposed in me. I may, however, without scruple, reveal that his invention related to combustion. One evening, when we had arranged to dine as usual together at the Café Royal, in Regent-street, he confided to me that he was in temporary want of funds, and I lent him all the money I had about me, some fifteen or sixteen pounds. Over the meal he talked more frequently than he was in the habit of doing of his invention. "It is near completion," he said, "and before I go to bed I intend to make some experiments which I am in hopes will put the finishing touch to it." Then he looked at me searchingly and thoughtfully, and said I might accompany him home if I liked and assist in the experiments. Burning with curiosity, and delighted at this mark of his confidence, I gladly consented, and we issued forth and proceeded to his rooms, which, singularly enough, were in Glass-house Street, at no great distance from the house in which M. Felix lived. On our way he purchased two bottles of brandy, remarking that even when the soul was in its highest state of exaltation the body required nourishing and sustaining. I acquiesced. He lived on the second floor, in two rooms, one his bedroom, the other the room in which he conducted his experiments. There were no evidences of the nature of these experiments visible, and he explained this by stating that, distrusting his housekeeper, he kept them in his cupboard. The first thing he did was to light a large fire; then he brought forth a brass frying-pan, upon which he emptied a packet of powder. "You must not be frightened at what I am about to do," he said. "There is no very great danger in it, but it needs courage." Being already primed with the wine we had at dinner, and with three glasses of the brandy he had purchased, I told him I was prepared for anything. Then he informed me that his experiments must be made without light from candle or lamp; so that, with the exception of the fire, we were in darkness. Then he put the brass frying-pan on the fire, and a blue vapour floated through the room. I felt a little nervous, but I would not confess it, and I helped myself to another glass of brandy and puffed away at a very large and very strong cigar with which he presented me. He bade me sit in a particular chair by a little table (upon which he considerably placed the two bottles of brandy, one by this time half empty), and he drew around me upon the floor, which was destitute of carpet, a circle with a piece of billiard

chalk, and said that so long as I did not move outside that charmed circle I should be safe. "Help yourself to some more brandy," he said, "and do not be frightened." I obeyed him as to the brandy, but I must confess I was in great trepidation, more especially as the dim objects in the room appeared to be going round and round. He threw some more powder into the brass frying-pan, and this time the vapour was green. He then asked me if I had anything in the shape of metal upon my person, and I answered yes, of course; upon which he stated that I might be in danger unless I divested myself of them, as he was about to do. At a little distance from me, between me and the fire, he drew upon the floor a smaller circle with his piece of billiard chalk, and within it placed a trinket or two of his own. I handed him my gold watch and chain, my diamond ring, my pearl and ruby pin, and a valuable charm of gold which I kept in my pocket for luck. These he placed with his own trinkets within the smaller circle, and said that now no harm could befall me. The objects in the room went round more and more as he muttered some cabalistic words, and to prevent myself from being overcome by terror I took some more brandy. Then he threw about half a dozen little packets of powder into the fire, one after another, and all sorts of colours appeared, and filled the room with a peculiar smell, which so affected me that I helped myself to brandy. I must not forget to mention that he had locked the door and put the key in his pocket. "If what I am doing alarms you," he said, "you may close your eyes. You have great courage, and to prove my friendship for you I shall present you with half the profits of my invention." I tried to thank him, but to my surprise my words were not very clearly spoken. Presently my eyes began to close and I fell asleep. When I awoke the room was in darkness. I called to my friend, but he did not answer me. Fearful lest he himself should have fallen a victim to his hazardous experiments, I rose unsteadily to my feet and felt around till my hands reached the door, which of course was locked. Luckily I had in my pocket a box of matches, and striking one I lit the candle. My friend was gone; I was alone in the room; but upon the floor was a small heap of ashes. Not only was my poor friend gone, but all his trinkets as well as my own were also gone. But there upon the floor was the fatal heap of ashes. I could arrive at but one conclusion, namely, that the combustion which was the kernel of his great invention had reduced him to ashes and destroyed him. There could be no other explanation of the extraordinary occurrence, because the door was still locked. Fearful lest I might be accused of his death, I forced the door open and fled, and from that day to this the affair has remained wrapt in mystery. This is the first time I have mentioned it, and I do so now in the interests of justice, lest some unfortunate person should be accused, as I might have been in the case of my friend, of spiriting M. Felix away.

May not *his* disappearance be set down to combustion? Are there any charred marks upon the floor of the room where his body lay? Were any ashes left? Was he given to dangerous experiments? My own experience may lead you, sir, to the proper solution of the mystery which hangs around his fate. I shall follow the further developments of the case of M. Felix with interest, and am, Yours, &c.'

"Another correspondent wrote:

"Sir,—I am a Spiritualist, and I possess the power of summoning from the Caverns of the Unseen and Unknown the Spirits of any individual upon whom I may call. There is but one way of arriving at the truth of the disappearance of the Body of M. Felix, and I offer to you the exclusive privilege of revealing this truth to an anxious and eager public. My fee will be five guineas. Upon your remitting to me this sum I undertake to summon the Spirit of M. Felix, and to ascertain from his own lips what has become of his Body. The power I possess is worth considerably more than the sum I name, and you, with this exclusive information in your possession, will obtain an advertisement for your valued newspaper which you could not otherwise obtain for five hundred times the amount. I inclose my name and address, which you may or may not publish as you please, and upon the receipt of the five guineas I will set to work at once. If you decline my offer the disappearance of this particular body will for ever remain a mystery. I urge you, in your own interests, not to neglect this opportunity.'

"Another correspondent wrote:

"Honoured Sir,—I have been reading all about M. Felix, and now comes the cruel news of his disappearance. Just as I was going to see the body and identify it! Just as I was going to realize a life-long dream! Will you allow me to explain, and will you render an inestimable service to a poor widow? I feel that you will, for you have a heart. Thirty-two years ago my husband left me suddenly. We were having tea, and in the middle of it he got up and said, "I'm off, and you'll never see me again." We had had a dispute about something (I beg you not to ask me what; it was a private matter), when he acted thus. He was a most overbearing man, and I had enough to do to bear with him. He left the house there and then, and I have never set eyes on him since. His name was not Felix, but are you sure that was M. Felix's proper name? I advertised for him, and said all would be forgiven and forgotten, but he didn't turn up. I heard he had gone to Australia, and no doubt he made his fortune there and came home to England to enjoy it; and as he was a man who never forgot and never forgave, he took the name of Felix and lived the lonely life he did. It was only yesterday the idea flashed across me that he was my long-lost husband, and that, if he did not make a will disinheriting me, his lawful wife, his fortune

belongs to me by every legal and moral right. I would put two or three questions to you, sir, to you who are always ready to help the oppressed. Did the supposed M. Felix make a will? If he did, where is it? Is there any portrait of him extant? I have a portrait of my poor husband—ah! much faded—but it stands to reason that it must differ considerably from the late portraits taken of the deceased. Show me M. Felix's portrait and I am ready to swear to my husband. In the absence of any evidence whatever, and failing the discovery of the deceased's mortal remains, is it not competent for me to make oath that he was my husband, and thus establish my claim to any property he may have left behind him? In deep grief, I am, honoured sir, your obliged and obedient servant, A LONELY WIDOW.'

"We could fill pages with letters of this description, but the three we have given are a sufficient indication of the interest excited by the incident. Among all these letters there was only one which offered any suggestion likely to be of practical value, and that was the letter signed 'A Lonely Widow.' Her interesting hypothesis that M. Felix was her long-lost husband was, of course, ridiculous, but she made mention of two subjects worthy of consideration. The first was, did M. Felix make a will? the second, was there any portrait of him extant? If a will were in existence, it would probably be in the care of a firm of lawyers who could have no good reason for keeping it in the background. We set to work at once upon this trail, but it led to nothing. No lawyers were found in possession of such a document, and it was not forthcoming from other quarters. Nor were we more successful with respect to a portrait of M. Felix. Mrs. Middlemore had never seen one, and a private search through his rooms was futile. Indeed, it is a further proof of the strange secrecy in which M. Felix's life was conducted that not a document or written paper of any description was discovered in his apartments. Some important statements upon this head will be presented further on.

"In pursuance of the advice our reporter gave Mrs. Middlemore, she communicated to the police the fact of the disappearance of his body. There the matter rested, and would have been likely to rest but for the initiatory steps we had already taken to throw a light upon the mystery. It is all very well to say that nobody's business is everybody's business; it is not the case. People talked and wrote letters, but we acted. It must be admitted that the police were not in a position to move actively in the affair. No definite charge had been offered for their investigation; no person was accused of a crime; it had not even been proved that a crime had been committed. Conjecture was theirs, and that was all. The law cannot move, cannot act upon conjecture; facts of a crime, or even of a supposed crime, are necessary before the administration of justice can be called upon to adjudicate. Suggestions were thrown out as to the advisability of offering a reward

for the discovery of the body, but who was to offer it? Even in the case of a deliberate and ascertained murder where the criminal is at large, the Government is notoriously slow in issuing such a proclamation, and the full weight of public opinion has frequently failed in inducing the authorities to offer a reward. It was not, therefore, to be expected that they would do so in this instance. Meanwhile there was one feature in the case which we desire to emphasize, and of which we never lost sight. Between the hours of twelve and one o'clock on the night of the 16th-17th January a man with a red scarf round his neck was seen to issue from the house in Gerrard-street, in which M. Felix resided. The man still remained undiscovered. It matters not who saw him, whether Mrs. Middlemore, or Constables Wigg or Nightingale, or all three together. The fact is established that he had been in the house for some purpose and had been seen to issue from it.

"Where was this man, and what motive had he for not coming forward?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE REPORTER OF THE "EVENING MOON" MAKES A DISCOVERY.

"ON the evening of the 19th our reporter paid a visit to Mrs. Middlemore. Sophy opened the street door for him.

"'Hallo, old un,' said the girl, 'it's you, is it?'

"'Yes, Sophy,' said our reporter, 'here I am again.'

"'As large as life,' remarked Sophy vivaciously, 'and twice as —no, I won't say that; you ain't arf a bad sort. What's yer little game this time, old 'un?'

"'Is Mrs. Middlemore in?' asked our reporter.

"'Yes, aunty's at 'ome. Do yer want to see 'er!'

"'That's what I've come for.'

"'Who's that, Sophy?' cried Mrs. Middlemore from the bottom of the basement stairs.

"'It's the old 'un, aunty,' screamed Sophy.

"'Don't be absurd,' said our reporter, pinching Sophy's cheek.

'It is I, Mrs. Middlemore, the reporter from the *Evening Moon*.'

"'Come down, sir,' cried Mrs. Middlemore, 'if come you must. Don't stop talking to that 'uzzy.'

"Sophy put her tongue in her cheek and whispering, 'Ain't she a treat?' preceded our reporter to the kitchen.

"'Good evening, Mrs. Middlemore,' said our reporter.

"'Good evening, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore. 'Sophy, 'ave you shut the street door tight?'

"'As tight as a drum,' replied Sophy.

"Mrs. Middlemore sank into a chair with a heavy sigh, and our reporter took a seat opposite her. There was a jug of beer on the table.

"'Will you 'ave a glass, sir?' said Mrs. Middlemore hospitably.

"No, thank you; I have just dined, and I thought I would come and have a little chat with you in a general way."

"Thank 'eaven it's about nothink particular," said Mrs. Middlemore in a tone of manifest relief.

"It may lead to something particular," observed our reporter genially. "We're only on the threshold as yet."

"Stop a bit, sir, please. Sophy!"

"Yes, aunty dear," responded the girl, in a tone of simulated sweetness.

"If I let you go out for a walk will you come back in arf an hour?"

Sophy hesitated. Between her longing for a run in the streets and her longing to hear what our reporter had to say, she felt herself in a difficulty.

"Well, now?" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore sharply.

"Oh, aunty dear," said Sophy, pressing the bosom of her frock and pretending to be greatly startled at her aunt's sharp voice, "you send my 'eart into my mouth."

"Will you promise not to stop out longer than an hour?"

"Mrs. Middlemore's anxiety to get rid of her decided the girl. For once she would forego the temptations of the streets.

"Don't want to go out," she said shortly.

"But you've got to go," said Mrs. Middlemore, resenting this opposition to her authority, "or I'll bundle you out. Promise, like a good girl."

"Shan't promise," said Sophy rebelliously.

"O, dear, O, dear!" moaned Mrs. Middlemore. "What am I to do with her? And after all the nice things you said of her this morning, sir!"

"Did yer say nice things of me?" asked Sophy of our reporter.

"I did, Sophy," he replied, "and I am sure you will do as your aunt tells you."

"That settles it. I'll go. 'Ow long for, aunty?"

"An hour. Not a minute more."

"I say"—to our reporter—"yer might lend us yer watch. Then I shouldn't make no mistake."

"Get along with you," said our reporter, laughing "The shops are full of clocks."

"Thank yer for nothink," said Sophy, proceeding to array herself. Spitting on the palm of her hand, she made a pretence of smoothing her hair. Then she looked at herself in a piece of looking-glass that was hanging on the wall, and turned her head this way and that, smirking most comically. Then she shook out her skirts and looked over her shoulder to see that they hung becomingly. Then she tied a piece of string round one yawning boot. Then she put on her head something in straw that once might have been called a hat, but which had long since forfeited all claims to respectability. Then she fished out a poor little

scarf about six inches square, and pinned it round her shoulders with a coquettishness not devoid of grace. Her toilet completed, she asked :

“‘Will I do?’

“‘Very nicely, Sophy,’ said our reporter. But although he spoke gaily he was stirred by a certain pity for this little waif, who was so conspicuously animated by a spirit to make the best of things—a spirit which might with advantage be emulated by her betters—and who made a joke even of her poverty and rags.

“‘Much obliged,’ said Sophy. ‘Give us a kiss, aunty. Now, I’m off.’

“And off she was, but not without saluting our reporter with an elaborate courtesy.

“Mrs. Middlemore waited till she heard the street door slam, and then said :

“‘Did you ever see the likes of her?’

“‘I declare to you, my dear madam,’ said our reporter, ‘that the more I see of Sophy the more I like her. What have the police done? Anything?’

“‘Nothink, sir. I went and told ‘em what ‘ad ‘appened, and two policemen come and looked at the bed, looked under it, looked in every room as you said they would, looked at me, and went away.’

“‘And they have not been here again?’

“‘No, sir.’

“‘Mrs. Middlemore, may I have another peep in M. Felix’s rooms?’

“‘Certainly, sir.’

“They went up together, Mrs. Middlemore breathing heavily, perfuming the air with a flavour of beer. There was an escritoire in the sitting-room and our reporter examined it.

“‘I’ll tell you what I’m looking for,’ he said; ‘I see pens, ink, and paper, denoting that M. Felix was occasionally in the habit of using them, but there is not a scrap of paper about with his writing on it. There is not even a monogram on the note paper. If we could find something it might furnish a clue. He received letters, I suppose?’

“‘O, yes, sir.’

“‘And the presumption is that he answered them. Did you ever post any of his letters?’

“‘Never once, sir.’

“‘Here is a waste paper basket; there must have been in it, at odd times, scraps of the letters he received and spoilt sheets of his own. Has your dustbin been emptied this week?’

“‘No, sir, but you wouldn’t find nothink of Mr. Felix’s in it. It was one of ‘is orders that whatever was in the waste paper basket should be burnt ‘ere in his own fireplace. I used to sweep this room in the morning when he was in bed, and he always said I did my work so quietly that he was never disturbed.’

"Look round the room, Mrs. Middlemore, and see if you miss anything. You would be pretty well acquainted with everything in it. What is the meaning of that gasp? You *do* miss something?"

"There was another desk, sir, and I don't see it."

"What kind of desk?"

"A small one, sir, that used to smell quite nice."

"Ah, made of cedar wood, no doubt. Did Mr. Felix keep his papers in that desk?"

"Some of 'is papers, sir."

"How do you know that?"

"I've come into the room when he's rung for me, and sor the desk open."

"Ocular proof, Mrs. Middlemore."

"What sort's that, sir?"

"Visible to the eye—*your* eye, my dear madam."

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Middlemore dubiously.

"Now, Mrs. Middlemore, can you inform me whether those papers you saw in the missing desk were private papers?"

"It ain't possible for me to say, sir."

"Neither can you say, I suppose, whether M. Felix set any particular store upon them?"

"Well, sir, now you bring me to it, things come to my mind."

"Exactly."

"Whenever I come into the room," said Mrs. Middlemore, "and the desk was open, Mr. Felix used to shut it up quick."

"Lest you should see them too closely."

"I'm sure I shouldn't 'ave made no use of 'em; least of all, bad use."

"That is not the point. He closed the desk quickly when another person was by, with an evident wish to keep all possible knowledge of them to himself."

"It looks like that. You *do* push a thing close."

"Our reporter accepted this as a compliment and continued:

"That appears to establish the fact that this desk—which probably was brought from India, Mrs. Middlemore—contained M. Felix's private papers?"

"It do, sir," said Mrs. Middlemore admiringly.

"And, therefore, papers of importance? The desk was inlaid with silver, Mrs. Middlemore."

"Lor', sir," exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, doubtless regarding our reporter as a man who dealt in enchantments. "How did you find that out?"

"It was, was it not?"

"Yes, sir, it was."

"When M. Felix had visitors, was this desk ever allowed to lie carelessly about?"

"No, sir, at them times he used to keep it in 'is bedroom, on a little table by the side of 'is bed."

"Let us look through the bedroom and see if it is there."

"They searched the bedroom thoroughly, without finding it."

"It is undoubtedly gone," said our reporter.

"It do look like it, sir."

"Mrs. Middlemore, when M. Felix was found dead in his chair, was this desk in either of the rooms?"

"I didn't see it, sir."

"You could not swear it was not here?"

"I shouldn't like to, sir."

"The probability, however, is that it had gone when the door was forced open?"

"Yes, sir."

"The police could scarcely take it away without your knowledge?"

"They'd 'ave been clever to do it."

"Had they done so, they would certainly have been exceeding their duties. Now, do not answer the questions I put to you too quickly. Were you in these rooms on the day before M. Felix's death?"

"I were, sir."

"Was the desk here then?"

"It were; I can swear to that."

"You saw it with your own eyes?"

"I couldn't see it with no others," replied Mrs. Middlemore smirking, in approval of her small wit.

"Of course you could not. Is there any particular reason why you are so positive of this?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Felix wanted somethink, and rung for me; and when I come into the room he was setting at this table with the desk open before 'im, and all the papers scattered about."

"That fixes it. Did he seem to be searching for, or examining with more than usual interest, any special document?"

"He seemed flustered and excited, sir; I can't say no more than that."

"He was not generally of an excitable temperament?"

"Not at all. He was easy going, and always with a pleasant word."

"A model man. I observe that you call him Mr. and not Monsieur?"

"I can't bring myself to foreign languages, sir. My tongue gits into a knot."

"He *was* a foreigner, I suppose?"

"I suppose so, sir. I ain't the best of judges."

"A Frenchman?"

"So I thought, sir."

"Or an Italian?"

"'Per'aps, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore wavering.

"'Or a Spaniard?'

"'Per'aps, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, growing more undecided.

"'Or a Russian?'

"'How *can* I say, sir?' said Mrs. Middlemore, [now quite at sea as to M. Felix's nationality.

"'He spoke the English language well?'

"'As well as me, sir.'

"'So that, after all, he might have been an Englishman?'

"'He might,' said Mrs. Middlemore, declining to commit herself, 'and he mightn't.'

"Our reporter did not press the point, as to which Mrs. Middlemore had evidently disclosed all she knew.

"'If we could find the missing desk, Mrs. Middlemore, it might throw a light upon the mystery.'

"Again did Mrs. Middlemore decline to commit herself; again did she answer, 'It might, and it mightn't, sir.'

"'I presume there was nothing in the desk that attracted your attention besides the papers?'

"'Only one thing, sir—a curious sort of knife.'

"'A paper knife, most likely.'

"'It was more like a dagger,' said Mrs. Middlemore. 'It 'ad a 'andle like a twisted snake, with a ' open mouth and a coloured stone in its eye. It 'ad a sharp p'int, too.'

"'How did you become aware of that? Did you ever try it?'

"'Not me, sir; but once I come in when Mr. Felix 'ad it in 'is 'and, playing with it, and all at once he dropped it like a 'ot pertater. He'd pricked 'isself with it, and there was blood on 'is 'and.'

"'You have furnished me with a valuable piece of evidence, Mrs. Middlemore. Papers are easily burnt, and a desk broken up and destroyed. It would not be so easy to get rid of that knife, which, from your description, must be a foreign dagger, and the identification of which would be a simple matter. For instance, you could swear to it, and so could I, who have never seen it.'

"'Anybody could swear to it, sir; it couldn't be mistook.'

"'Did M. Felix keep this dagger always in his desk?'

"'I should say he did, sir. I never sor it laying about loose, and never sor it at all unless the desk was open.'

"'Did you see it on the last occasion you saw the desk open, a few hours before M. Felix's death?'

"'Yes, sir; it was among 'is papers.'

"'Have you any suspicion, Mrs. Middlemore, who at this present moment has possession of the desk and the dagger?'

"'Not the least, sir. 'Ave you?'

"'I have. A suspicion amounting to a certainty. Have you forgotten the man with a red handkerchief round his neck who escaped from the house on the night of the eventful discovery?'

"'I'm not likely to forget 'im,' said Mrs. Middlemore, and then added, in an excited tone, 'Do you think it was 'im as took it?'

"'He, and no other. Now we arrive at the motive of his visit; it was robbery. Not a vulgar robbery such as an ordinary thief would have committed, but one of a particular nature, and committed with a knowledge that M. Felix's Indian desk contained a secret or secrets of value, which no doubt he could turn to good account. We are getting on, Mrs. Middlemore,' said our reporter, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. 'In these affairs there is nothing like patience.'

"'You're as good as a detective, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, 'and you've got the patience of Job. You won't mind my saying that I've thought lots of your questions foolish, and only put for the sake of saying somethink. I don't think so now, sir.'

"'Thank you for the compliment. I assure you I have not asked you one idle question. Recall to mind whether the man with the red handkerchief round his neck carried anything away with him that looked like a desk as he escaped from the house.'

"'I don't believe, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, with evident reluctance, 'as that will ever be known.'

"'Oh, yes, it will. Answer my question.'

"'I didn't notice nothink,' replied Mrs. Middlemore.

"We pause a moment here to observe that it was these reserved replies, when any question relating to this man was asked, as well as the conflicting testimony of the constables Wigg and Nightingale, that led us to the conclusion, already recorded, that the precise truth was not revealed as to which one of the three witnesses actually saw the man. Having committed themselves to a certain statement for the purpose of exonerating the constables from official blame, they could not afterwards contradict themselves, because such a contradiction would have thrown grave doubt upon the whole of their evidence.

"'He could not,' said our reporter, 'very well have carried away an article of this description without its being noticed by any one who saw him.'

"'Ain't it excusable, sir,' observed Mrs. Middlemore nervously, 'when you think of the storm and the confusion we was in?'

"'Well, perhaps; but it is a pity we cannot obtain definite information on the point. Isn't that a knock at the street door?'

"'Yes, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, making no attempt to move from the room.

"'You had better go down and see who it is. I will remain here. There is really nothing to be frightened at. It might be Sophy come back.'

"At this suggestion Mrs. Middlemore left the room and went to the street door. Being alone, our reporter looked about him, and almost immediately made an important discovery. Against the wall, on the right hand side of the door as he entered, stood a

massive sideboard, a very handsome piece of furniture. The lower part of this sideboard was close against the wainscot, above which there was a space between the back of the sideboard and the wall of about an inch in width. Happening to glance at the back of the sideboard, the light of the candle which our reporter held in his hand fell upon something bright. Stooping, he drew the object out, and was excited to find it was the identical dagger about which he and Mrs. Middlemore had been conversing. There could not be the possibility of a mistake. Its handle, as Mrs. Middlemore had described, resembled a twisted snake; the mouth was open, and in its head was a ruby to represent an eye. A dangerous instrument, with a very sharp point, the metal of which it was composed being bright steel. But it was not the peculiar shape of the handle, nor the bright steel of the blade, nor the ruby eye, which excited our reporter. It was the fact that there was rust upon the blade, and that this rust was caused by blood, of which there were light stains plainly visible on the handle of the dagger."

(To be continued.)

THE PRINCESSE DES URSINS.

By BRITIFFE SKOTTOWE,

AUTHOR OF "SUDDEN DEATH."

ANNE MARIE DE LA TREMOUILLE, Princesse de Chalais, Duchesse de Bracciano, but better known by her dowager title of the Princesse des Ursins (Princess Orsini), was one of those remarkable women whose influence does not seem to have depended at all on the fascinations of girlhood, but on the contrary did not attain any very marked estimation until she had emerged entirely from the period of youth, developed gradually with her advancing years, and reached its highest pitch when she had somewhat over-passed the usual allowance of three-score years and ten, which is allotted to ordinary mortals. History supplies many examples of ladies, the energy of whose temperament has enabled them to play conspicuous parts in the worlds of politics and love at an age when most women are preparing to retire from the former, and have long been dismissed from the latter. Bérénice, Brunehaut, Diana of Poitiers, Ninon de l'Enclos, among others, were the marvel of their own time and the wonder of successive ages. In all these cases, however, the unusual prolongation of their career of power and influence was due to their long retention of the charms of their youth and the remarkable continuance of the fascination of their maturer years. The Princess Orsini, on the contrary, during the career of power which has made her name famous, had closed the account entirely with youth. Nay, it would be mere affectation to deny that she had left the furthest boundary of middle age behind her at the moment when she first assumed importance in the political world. A woman at sixty-three can no longer be called young in any sense of the word, and it was at the age of three-score years and three that the subject of this article first made her *début* in any public capacity in the political arena.

Her life was altogether late as regards all its salient points. Not till she was twenty-four did she shake off the seclusion of girlhood and enter on the comparative freedom of married life. For over four years the brilliant *salons* of Paris hailed her as an undoubted *belle*, but without according her a shadow of political influence. Then a duelling adventure obliged her husband (Prince de Chalais) to fly to Spain, and thither his devoted wife very soon followed him. This was in the year 1663, when Louis XIV., *le Grand Monarque*, was already rising to the height of his splendour, and had made the name of Versailles renowned through Europe as the politest, the

gayest, the most magnificent court in the world. In Spain Madame de Chalais shone once more as a *belles*, was soon surrounded by troops of friends and admirers, and laid deep the roots of that connection with the Peninsula which was to serve her so well in the future. The death of her husband sent her an apparently heart-broken widow to Rome, where she retired into a convent and kept her widowhood with the utmost severity and devotion.

After a time she got tired of this phase and returned to the world. She was at once introduced to the most brilliant and frivolous circle of Roman society, under the auspices of the Cardinal d'Estrées, who filled the post of ambassador of France at the Papal court. The Duke de St. Simon paints the situation in somewhat scandalous language. It will be sufficient, however, to indicate that the cardinal proved a very efficient friend, advanced the princess's interests in every way, both at Rome and at the French court, and settled a portion of his revenue upon her. He was even so obliging as to find her a second husband of high rank, the Duke de Bracciano, a member of the powerful house of Orsini. It is by no means improbable that the astute cardinal may have been influenced in his choice by a wish to form a connection between France and the Italian nobility in view of his master's designs on the Spanish succession. It is quite certain that her second husband conformed exactly to Madame de Bracciano's wishes, and that the control that he exercised over her was the very slightest in character. The marriage was celebrated with great pomp in 1674, the bride being at that date about thirty-nine years of age.

Her portrait, sketched by the facile pen of the Duke de St. Simon, will form a fitting prelude to the more stirring scenes which follow. "She was tall," he says, "but not too tall. Her eyes were blue and of infinite expression. Her figure displayed the most exquisite symmetry. Her face was not so much beautiful as taking. Her manner was at once lofty and dignified; and yet endowed with such marvellous grace that I have never seen any to compare with her. Her mental gifts were as remarkable as her bodily attractions. She possessed to an uncommon degree the power of persuasion. Her versatility was so great that there was hardly any phase of seduction to which she could not have recourse in order to influence the obstinate or reluctant. She never despaired of her aim, and she usually attained it. She was dignified without being repellent. Her conversation was brilliant and fluent, without loquacity; deriving additional fascination from a silvery voice and a striking delivery. With all these advantages she was naturally calculated to shine both in society and the diplomatic world at Rome. She had passed through an excellent school for the development of her natural gifts. She was ambitious, but not as her sex usually are. She wasted no thoughts or aspirations on the paltry triumphs which most women aim at. Her ambition was worthy of a man, or rather of a great statesman. She possessed

the highest diplomatic talent, insight and adroitness. She was haughty, proud, and yet not over-scrupulous as to the means if the end were lofty. A true and faithful, but very exacting friend. An implacable enemy. In conclusion, graceful and eloquent; quick to learn and slow to reveal; true to her friends and sure of herself; light-hearted, yet far the reverse of frivolous; and always retaining with the utmost vitality the fullest possible command of herself and her faculties—such was the celebrated Duchess de Bracciano."

The new duchess speedily became the leader of Roman society. Dukes, cardinals and princes jostled one another within her *salons*, and paid their court to the beauties of the day. A perpetual round of balls, masques and water-parties made up the record of the golden hours, varied only by the marriage of the duchess's sister to the Duke Lanti, a match which was mainly due to the duchess's diplomacy, and materially strengthened her connection with the Roman nobility. Her influence was never more strikingly shown than in the great social crisis of 1683, when Innocent XI., "the Pope of the League of Augsburg," issued a decree against the wearing of *décolleté* dresses, and the beauties of Rome were compelled to choose between the veiling of their charms and disobedience to the voice of the Holy Father. Naturally the claims of beauty carried the day, and flat rebellion would have broken out in the *boudoirs* of the Eternal City, but for the prompt conduct of the Duchess de Bracciano. She appeared at a great reception in a high dress. The next day several other great ladies followed her example. Within a week all Rome was decently covered, and the War of the White Shoulders was averted.

The next years of her life were spent mainly in Paris, where she was engaged in a lawsuit with her brother. The death of the Duke de Bracciano, in 1698, brought fresh legal troubles upon her, and it was some time before she could satisfactorily assert her rights as his heiress. From that time she regularly adopted the dowager title of Princess Orsini, which was modified by her countrymen into the *Princesse des Ursins*. She was then sixty-three, and at that age even her prolonged reign as a beauty was completely over. Yet she was really just about to enter on the most stirring and most famous portion of her career.

The growing importance of the question of the succession to the vast Spanish inheritance, which would fall vacant on the death of Charles II. of Spain, furnished her with an opening for striking out boldly into the sea of politics. Her position at Rome and her connection with the Roman nobility enabled her to work incalculable service to the cause of Louis XIV. and his grandson, Philip of Anjou. She persuaded the Roman court to accept the will of Charles II., which bequeathed his entire dominions to Philip of Anjou; she further procured their assent to the marriage of Philip to Marie Louise, the second daughter of the shifty Duke of Savoy.

If her services, however, were great, her reward was vast. The princess was a child; she had no experience in the art of government; she required a skilled and experienced head to guide her in her first essay at playing the queen of a great country. It was inevitable that if her tutor should succeed in gaining her affections, the former would become the real ruler of Spain. The Princess des Ursins was clever enough to see this. She therefore intrigued tirelessly to obtain the post. She massed together almost as vast a league of powers and potentates to support her pretensions as that which was preparing to dispute the claims of Philip of Anjou. The Pope, the Duke of Savoy, the Duchess of Burgundy (the favourite daughter-in-law of Louis XIV.), the Prince of Monaco (French ambassador at Rome), the Maréchale de Noailles, all spoke in her favour. Last, but by no means least, the Cardinal Porto-Carrero, the real leader of the French party in Spain, requested that she might be appointed to the post. She was, moreover, admirably adapted to fill it well, both owing to her talents and zeal for France, and also through her intimate connection with Spain and the Spanish nobility, which was the result of her previous visit. It is not surprising, therefore, that the result of her intrigues was that she set out for Spain in company with the new king and queen, with the duty of tutoring the young queen, the rank of *camarera mayor* (mistress of the household), and the important privilege of a perfectly free hand. It was also no small testimony to the estimation in which she was held at the French court, that she travelled the greater part of the way to the Spanish capital in the queen's own litter and by the side of her charge. It may be imagined that she spared no efforts to utilize this advantage to acquire a hold on the queen's affections.

The queen, however, was one of those extraordinary children whose minds are full grown at fourteen. She did not submit readily to the allurements of her new preceptress, though she soon conceived a high respect for her advice. The princess, writing to the Maréchale de Noailles, December, 1701, complains that she had been totally unable as yet to displace the Italian ladies-in-waiting in the confidence and affection of the queen. Their shadow still faintly interposed between her and the supreme influence she aimed at, though she worked far harder in the service of her mistress than they had ever done or were likely to do. The whole letter, in fact, is a tissue of complaints. The work was far harder than the poor princess had ever expected. The results were far from commensurate with her hopes and efforts. She says:

"What a frightful errand you have sent me on. Now I can no longer rest when I am weary, or eat when I am hungry. I am lucky if I get any dinner at all, and am generally on the move all the time. Mdme. de Maintenon would be highly amused if she knew all I have to do. It is my business to receive the royal jacket when the king retires to rest, and to return it to him with

his august breeches when he is disposed to rise again. Every night, when the royal couple have gone to bed, the Conde de Benevento entrusts to my charge the king's sword, a *pot de chambre*, and a lamp—it being highly probable that I upset the latter over my clothes."

Allowing for exaggeration, the discomfort and ridicule of the position must have been immense; and the picture of the princess at her nocturnal guard, her clothes spotted with filthy lamp-oil, the sword of his Most Catholic Majesty in one hand and a still stranger burden in the other, is supremely ridiculous.

She was lodged, however, sumptuously, as became her important position. A suite of the best rooms was reserved for her in the palace. She was attended by seven or eight gentlemen of the court, six pages of high rank, a dozen lacqueys and numerous other officers. She seems to have found a relief from her tribulations in dilating, with a true womanly love of display, on the glories of a *très beau carrosse*, and another of a still more gorgeous type, in which she was drawn by six horses—to the great admiration, no doubt, of the mob.

As was only natural, she rapidly acquired the desired influence over the royal pair. The queen, a sensible, lovable child with rare intelligence, soon became conscious of the debt she owed her *camarera mayor*, and in consequence began to entertain a deep affection for her, with all the fervour of her warm Italian nature. The princess, moreover, undoubtedly did her best to lighten the heavy burden which had fallen on the poor child's shoulders. She relaxed, as far as she dared, the strict, tedious ceremonial of the Spanish court, which dated from the punctilious days of Philip II. She introduced the amusement of private theatricals, and substituted the comedies of Corneille and Racine for the more ponderous productions of Spanish art. She set in motion a swift round of concerts and *fêtes*, which served as a welcome relief to the tedium of the court and the monotonous details of finance. So it was scarcely singular that both the king and queen, feeling that to her care alone they owed what little pleasure brightened their weary lives, should regard her at last with an affection and esteem which bade fair to place in her hands the supreme power she aimed at.

Meanwhile, she had embarked in earnest upon the more difficult portion of her programme—the establishment of her political power on a secure foundation. There were three parties in Spain at this time. The Austrian, which was almost extinct; the French, headed by the Cardinal Porto-Carrero, which had the entire control of the country; lastly, a new national party had risen up under the leadership of the Count de Montellano, whose motto was "Spain for the Spaniards," and who hated the domineering patronage of Louis XIV. and his agents quite as fervently as the attempts at coercion initiated by the Austrians. The princess, with her usual insight, perceived that this party was rapidly

acquiring importance, and must eventually become supreme. She decided to throw in her lot with them; to abandon her old ally, Porto-Carrero; and to frustrate the views of Louis XIV. The plot was dangerous and daring in the extreme, and would in itself stamp her as an unusually clever and daring woman. She persuaded Philip to break away from the dependence in which his grandfather would have held him; to throw in his lot with the country of his adoption; to identify himself with the nation. If he would be king at all, he must be the national king, not the King of Castile, not the king of the French party. Nothing, in fact, but this policy of Madame des Ursins could ever have aroused the deep and peculiar loyalty and patriotism of the Spanish nation in favour of an alien king.

She secured his crown to Philip, but she hazarded her own power. She quarrelled with Porto-Carrero, with the French ambassador, her old friend Cardinal D'Estrées, and with Daubenton, the king's Jesuit confessor. Unfavourable reports of her conduct were carried to Versailles. Louis himself began to regard her as the enemy of his plans, a female Achitophel who incited his family against him. And so after a long and complicated intrigue, in which the princess for some time successfully played off Philip's affection for his wife against his respect for his grandfather, a peremptory order for her recall was issued from Versailles, and all parties had no choice but to obey. According to St. Simon the cause of her disgrace lay in a letter which she wrote to Louis XIV. on the subject of certain charges reported against her at Paris by the Abbé D'Estrées, the successor of the cardinal. He had stated that she had an unworthy intimacy with her *confidant*, one D'Aubigny, which might even amount to marriage. This letter fell into her hands, and she opened it. Reckless of the consequences, she wrote off at once to Versailles denying the story, and making use of the remarkable expression, "*pour mariée, non !*" This might be merely the outspoken expression of aristocratic indignation, or it might imply unutterable depths. Louis and his court of course assumed the latter. Her audacity in opening D'Estrées' letter, coupled with her unblushing avowal of her own degradation, was more than this virtuous monarch could endure, and so he recalled her. The absurdity of the story, however, which depends solely on the authority of St. Simon, is only too apparent when various facts are taken into consideration. First, it is impossible to imagine Louis undertaking the part of Censor of Morals, as long as the Duke of Maine flaunted his dukedom in the face of Europe. Secondly, the princess herself was now sixty-nine; in fact, rather past the age at which the hot blood of youth might have led her into such a folly. Thirdly, D'Aubigny was allowed to accompany her to France, went with her to Versailles on her reconciliation with Louis, was introduced to the king, to Madame de Maintenon and Madame de Noailles, and eventually returned with her to Spain in

apparently unabated favour. This alone seems to render it almost incredible that the cause of her disgrace could have been an unworthy connection with this man; or else exposes Louis to the charge of utterly inconceivable baseness. The political reasons for her recall, moreover, are in themselves sufficient, and, in a note addressed by Louis himself to the Abbé D'Estrées, they are very plainly suggested:

"The complaints against the princess have now reached a point when it is necessary for me to take notice of them. I am now fully alive to the evils which have resulted from her career of power in Spain. The time has come for her to retire."

The date of her exile was December, 1704, in the winter of the year that was signalized by the English victories of Blenheim and Gibraltar.

In the hour of her adversity the princess showed the most consummate tact. She submitted to the king's command without a murmur. She forbore to see the queen, who would doubtless have broken out into the loudest complaints and protestations. She started at once towards the frontier. But there her complaisance stopped. Louis would have had her proceed by the shortest route straight to Rome—her appointed place of exile. On the contrary, she journeyed as slowly as possible. She wished at once to show the great king that his power over her was not illimitable, and to allow the effects of her absence to be thoroughly felt in Spain before she had put any very great distance between her and the Spanish frontier. Her policy was crowned with complete success. A brief period of mismanagement followed, during which French ambassadors and French generals tried to rule in her place; but their Gallicizing tendencies only alienated the people, and threw them into the arms of the English. Philip and his queen, moreover, had submitted to the loss of their dearly-loved friend with considerable secret indignation. Their affection for her was only strengthened by her exile, until at last they revolted from the tutelage of their grandfather, and boldly insisted on the return of the princess and the dismissal of all obnoxious Frenchmen.

It was not, however, such a simple matter to persuade the princess to return as might have been anticipated. She stipulated for the *amende honorable* in the widest sense. She insisted on being first received with all honour at Versailles. She came—fascinated the king, and alarmed the wifely soul of Madame de Maintenon. What if this engaging young thing of nearly seventy were to allure away the susceptible heart of Louis, who was still a boy in imagination though sixty-six in years? The sooner her dangerous charms were removed the better. We catch a faint gleam of jealousy in a complaint of Madame de Maintenon that the princess did not seem at all inclined to start on her return journey; a faint echo of malicious laughter in Saint Simon's explanation that this reluctance was partly to be accounted for by considerations affecting

Maintenon's age and failing health. And yet there is something so inconceivably grotesque in this elderly romance that nothing but the studied delays of the guest, the obvious anxiety of the hostess, and the plain speaking of Saint Simon could procure for it the slightest credence. There appears, however, to be no doubt that Louis felt the influence of the princess's manner to a remarkable degree, and made no attempt to hide it. He treated her while she remained at Versailles with the respect due to a queen, and when she at length departed, he permitted her to name her own terms.

It is, however, perhaps more likely that the whole comedy was merely an elaborate plot; and this view seems borne out by certain mysterious letters supposed to be written by Louis XIV. to Grammont, who had practically assumed the ruling position in Spain which the princess had vacated. Louis in fact realizing at last, from direct information, that the French hold on Spain had been violently endangered by this dismissal of the princess, and that the king and queen were inconsolable at her departure, came to the conclusion that her recall was a mere question of time. He therefore determined to take the initiative himself, and send her back to her adopted country with such marks of favour as to bind her indissolubly to the cause of France. In pursuit of this policy he submitted at discretion to her demands. With the full consent of Maintenon, he received her at Versailles with the highest honours and the most exaggerated gallantry.

Maintenon's anxiety for her departure was prompted solely by the dangerous state of Spain and the reiterated complaints of Philip and his spouse. It was the princess's own vanity solely which magnified Louis' gallantry into devotion, and for a short time deluded her into the flattering, if slightly ridiculous, dream of figuring once more as a bride at the advanced age of seventy. This theory is much more in accordance with Louis' character than the broad farce which Saint Simon has delineated, no doubt with much malicious enjoyment; but the latter is far too delicious to be entirely dismissed on the slight evidence advanced in favour of the former.

The return of the princess to Spain in June, 1705, was a triumphal march. At Bordeaux she was received with almost royal honours. The principal people of the town, the mayor and his deputy, the chief lawyers and merchants, all turned out in *gala* to bow down and make pretty speeches to her. At St. Jean de Luz she found the royal carriage awaiting her, attended by a numerous escort of distinguished gentlemen and officers. The villages, towns and boroughs on the route sent out their militia to present arms before her and to supply a guard of honour wherever she passed the night. Her train gradually augmented as she advanced towards the capital. The thunder of artillery, the blaze of fireworks and the roar of increasing multitudes heralded her pro-

gress. In many places the road was literally carpeted with enormous bouquets of flowers. At Canillas she was met by the French ambassador, Marshal Tessé, at the head of nearly half the court and the royal household. Lastly, to show their esteem and affection, the royal couple themselves left Madrid and came some little distance to meet her—an honour which had never been conferred on any subject before since the foundation of the Spanish monarchy. The meeting was very affecting. The king and queen both kissed her again and again, and broke out into the wildest protestations of joy. They even insisted on her entering the royal carriage, but this honour she had the good sense to decline, for it would have involved a hideous violation of Spanish etiquette. Their return found Madrid all *en fête*. The whole city was on the move in the wildest state of excitement, and the royal carriages could hardly advance at all through the dense crowds that thronged the streets. But it was for the princess that the loudest acclamations were reserved. Her appearance was the signal for an outburst of the most genuine rejoicing, caught up and flashed from lip to lip till the whole city rang with the enthusiastic shout of "Long live the *camarera mayor*."

We have said that she returned to Spain with full powers. To her discretion was entrusted both the choice of the French ambassador and the nomination of the commander-in-chief. She chose Amelot and Tessé. It was agreed that Louis should listen to no reports about her, and that she should be bound by no instructions except those received from him directly. On her return, the whole control of the country fell once more into her hands. To her was committed the appointment of ministers, and the first she made was to the finance department. On her shoulders practically devolved the duty of carrying on the government and maintaining the war against the English and Austrians—a difficult task in the face of a treasury impoverished by war, an army disheartened by defeat, a *noblesse* turbulent and loth to submit to any governor, a people alienated by misgovernment and hatred of the foreigner. Her difficulties, therefore, were simply enormous. Success would have involved a miracle.

And yet success did partially attend her efforts. She had come with the intention of depressing the nobles and ruling by means of the middle classes alone; of governing the country principally by the agency of the natives; of depressing the overgrown and pernicious power of the church; of reforming the army and the finances. With the help of Orry, a Frenchman in whom she confided implicitly, she succeeded in establishing a certain amount of order in the fiscal system. She worked hard at the almost hopeless task of restoring efficiency to the Spanish army. She encouraged the king to put himself at the head of the army she had raised for him. She was in fact the life and soul of the war. Even when Madrid had surrendered to the enemy, and the Royal family were homeless fugi-

tives, she never despaired—she had the courage to hope on still, to wait and watch for better days. Her heroism was at last the sole prop of the fainting French dynasty.

Her mistake, however, was that she attempted too much. She had broken through the proud privileges of the Spanish nobles; had even succeeded in procuring the condemnation of the haughtiest for treason. She had advanced men of humble birth to high official position. She had steadily maintained Orry, though his nationality, his systematic measures, his unsparing taxation, had rendered him extremely unpopular, and her own popularity had inevitably waned as well. In short, by the end of the year 1706, Aragon, Catalonia, Valencia, had all declared for the Austrians, and if Castille still supported Philip it was more out of hostility to Aragon than love of the princess's government. The victory of Almanza, however, in 1707, produced a marvellous transformation.

The princess took advantage of the reaction in favour of the French dynasty, to abolish the separate liberties of Aragon and to decree that for the future the Cortes of the different provinces should not meet independently, but should be united in one body; which, it may be as well to add, was very seldom summoned. These measures were completed in 1710, by the abolition of the separate liberties of Castille; and the ancient constitution of the Spanish kingdoms was practically at an end, destroyed by the hand of a woman.

To her honour it must be added that, during the terrible crisis of the year 1709, it was this woman who alone remained undaunted, unsubdued; even when the great king himself recoiled before the thunder of Marlborough's artillery, and humbly begged for peace. *He* was willing to displace his grandson and surrender Spain to the enemy, but he reckoned without the Princess des Ursins. She inspired the weak king with unusual courage and determination; she advised him to throw himself on the loyalty of his people and appeal to their patriotism against the alien invader; she encouraged him to reject the commands of his grandfather and maintain the kingdom which she had so long preserved for him. Well might the sullen and baffled Germans mutter with angry execrations that "when the devil could not come himself, he sent an old woman." The victories of Brihuega and Villa Viciosa established the Bourbon dynasty securely on the throne of Spain, and the Peace of Utrecht confirmed the *fait accompli*.

It may be argued that her power has been overrated, that much which has been attributed to her personally was really due to Philip himself, to the ministers, to Berwick and Vendôme. It is true, so far, that the visible agency in each case is not the Princess des Ursins. The visible agency is Philip, but Philip was ruled by his wife, who never did anything without consulting the princess; or else it is Orry, the controller, who was her creature and agent; or Amelot, the ambassador, whose official existence was due to her

favour; or generals like Tessé, Berwick, Vendôme, whose appointment she had requested, and who depended entirely on her for money, munitions and provisions, wherewith to maintain their armies. It is enough to read her clear, statesman-like letters to Chamillard on the state of the nation and the war, and her appeals to Madame de Maintenon, to see who is the real ruler of Spain, the life and soul of the resistance to the English. Her importance, moreover, may be estimated by the fact that for a long time the Peace of Utrecht itself was delayed by the difficulty of satisfying her demand, that the Duchy of Luxemburg should be created an independent principality for her sole possession. Ridiculous as the fact may be that a woman of her extraordinarily masculine ability and common sense should have been so far susceptible to the vanity of her sex, as to delay and endanger the success of the efforts to which she had devoted ten years of her life for such a paltry consideration, yet the State documents of the time show beyond dispute that this pretension of hers for a long time blocked the way to a final settlement; that both Great Britain and Holland distinctly pledged themselves to secure her some portion of territory, and that the Duchy of Limburg, the Duchy of Luxemburg, the County of Chimay, were seriously proposed in turn by the powers. What were the views of Queen Anne's ministers on the subject may be gathered from the following extract:

"By the twenty-first article of the preliminaries agreed on by the plenipotentiaries of his Catholic Majesty and her Britannic Majesty, her Britannic Majesty promises that she will forthwith effect that the Princess des Ursins be placed in actual possession of the Duchy of Limburg, or some other portion of the Low Countries, to be arranged to the satisfaction of the princess."

Her design appears to have been to eventually exchange this territory in the Netherlands for Touraine and Amboise, which she considered that Louis would be only too glad to surrender. With this scheme in her mind she actually sent her *confidant*, D'Aubigny, to Amboise with instructions to purchase a strip of land and build thereon an enormous palace for her future residence. Her orders were carried out to the letter. The luxurious *château* of Chanteloup rose gradually in all its splendour, while the world wondered what on earth could induce the princess to build such a palace in such an out of the way spot; for of course it was clear from the first that D'Aubigny must be merely her agent. The secret, however, very soon leaked out, and from that time she became an object of suspicion to the Court of Versailles.

Her career, however, was now drawing to its close, and her fall was precipitated by her own folly.

In 1714, while the negotiations for the princess's principality were yet pending, the poor little queen died—perhaps the happiest event of her troubled career. The question was: who would

succeed her? For though Philip loved her dearly, and was inconsolable for nearly a month after her death, it was quite clear to any one who knew his weak uxorious character in the slightest, that he could no more get on without a wife to govern him than a baby could do without a nurse. And so every Catholic court in Europe with marriageable daughters on hand was naturally on the *qui vive*. It was also a highly important question to the Court of Versailles. Its importance to the princess can hardly be overestimated. It was at this period that she fell into the extraordinary blunder of imagining that Philip's great and undoubted affection for her might induce him to marry her; though she was an old woman of seventy-eight and he a young man of thirty-two, with all the courts of Europe to choose from. Imagine the shrieks of laughter. Imagine the agonies which even Spanish courtiers must have experienced in the presence of this extraordinary flirtation. Imagine the delight with which the busy scandal-mongers of Versailles must have heard that the princess had caused a special wooden corridor to be knocked up between her apartments and the king's, in order that her visits of consolation might be effected without fuss or ceremony. The most ridiculous part of the whole thing was, that the advanced age of the lady made it impossible to hint at any impropriety. It was all the broadest farce.

Louis and Maintenon undoubtedly did not share in the general amusement. It was no small matter to them to see Philip gradually becoming the slave of this daring and ambitious woman. She had been far too independent as Princess des Ursins; as Queen of Spain she might break loose from France altogether. They were afraid, however, to provoke her openly, and preferred to work underground for her ruin by the hand of Philip's confessor, Père Robinet, a staunch adherent of Louis XIV. St. Simon relates that one day the king, who had long wondered why his confessor always appeared embarrassed when questioned with regard to news from France, took the father aside and asked him the meaning of his conduct. After some pressing Robinet declared that there was a rumour afloat in France that the King of Spain was about to marry the Princess des Ursins. The king thereupon appeared very much disturbed and declared with some show of repugnance that nothing was further from his intentions. From this time his manner towards the princess sensibly cooled, and he ceased entirely to prosecute her claims to a separate principality. In fact he gave in his adhesion to the Peace of Utrecht without any stipulation in her favour.

The princess, realizing her error when it was too late, now decided to give up all hopes of becoming a bride, and to marry Philip as soon as possible to some princess of a docile and insignificant character, by whose means she might retain the indirect empire which she had so long exercised over the king and the kingdom. With this view she pitched upon Elizabeth Farnese, of

Parma, a young lady whose deficiencies in all that would render her a suitable spouse for a great monarch were supposed to be counterbalanced by her total lack of all qualities likely to endanger the supremacy of Madame des Ursins. On this point, however, the latter was egregiously mistaken. Elizabeth Farnese was a termagant of the liveliest possible temper and the most unbounded ambition. She was no more likely to submit to the ascendancy of any other woman, than Philip himself was to offer the slightest opposition to any wish of his wife's however fantastic. There appears no doubt in fact that Alberoni, the intriguing Parmesan ecclesiastic, whom the princess consulted as to the character of Elizabeth, designedly misrepresented it; no doubt in the hope that the marriage would be followed by the disgrace of the princess and his own advancement to power.

There appears to be no doubt that the true character of Elizabeth was known at Versailles, and that the French court intentionally kept the princess in the dark with regard to her fatal error. This was the revenge of Louis and Maintenon for the princess's attempt to marry Philip herself. They delivered her over bound to Elizabeth Farnese, and the result might be easily predicted. She precipitated her own fall, however, by an act of inconceivable rashness. She had already made every arrangement for the marriage. Alberoni had been sent as ambassador to Parma, to negotiate the matter. It had been finally settled that Elizabeth should be married by proxy on the 16th of August. Then suddenly a few incautious words of her enemies, perhaps a jeer, perhaps a covert threat, disclosed to the princess the gulf on which she was advancing. Her measures were taken in an instant. She at once dispatched to Parma a confidential emissary with orders to stop the marriage and announce that it would be broken off. The Duke of Parma, however, got an inkling of what was going to happen; and so when the messenger arrived just in time after a tremendous journey, he was waylaid, detained, and finally bribed to silence until the marriage ceremony had been completed. The new queen at once wrote to her husband. She demanded a gift—Herodias-like. It was the dismissal of the Princess des Ursins. "I only ask you for one thing," she wrote, "and that is that I may dismiss Madame des Ursins. Grant me this if you really wish our wedded life to be happy." Is it likely that a man like Philip would refuse, especially with his own grudge still rankling in his heart?

The princess it seems was warned that there was a storm brewing, that the new queen had sworn her destruction, that her reappointment to the office of *camarera mayor* was a snare for her greater disgrace; but she believed it not. She trusted partly in Philip's gratitude, partly in his long submission to her influence. "Bah," she replied, "it cannot be true. He would never dare." He was bolder or weaker than she thought.

She started to meet her new mistress, and on the 23rd of December she found the queen at a little village named Quadraque. There are two different accounts of what happened. San Felipe declares that Madame des Ursins very imprudently proceeded to lecture the queen, and told her pretty roundly that she had better not interfere in the politics of the country. The queen thereupon got in a furious rage. St. Simon, on the contrary, states that the princess gave no cause for offence whatever, but that in the middle of the conversation the queen suddenly and no doubt intentionally caught her up, declared that she would not be insulted and stormed like a mad woman. Anyhow she screamed loudly for her guards, and when they rushed wildly in ordered them to remove *cette folle* from her presence and transport her just as she was across the frontier. The captain of the guard felt slightly alarmed at undertaking such an extraordinary commission without the order of the king. "Have you not been instructed to obey me implicitly in anything and everything?" inquired the queen, no doubt stamping her foot with rage. Certainly he had, but— And so at last the queen sat down, and making a desk of her knee, wrote him out in full an order to the identical effect of her verbal command, and there was nothing left for the poor man—Amenzaga was his name—but to obey.

Gently, but firmly, therefore, he explained his disagreeable duty to the princess. A carriage was hastily got ready. Then just as she was, in all the discomfort of full court dress, she was obliged to enter in company with a maid and two officers of the guard; and in a short time the lumbering equipage was jolting on towards the frontier. Snow was falling heavily, the country lay like a white sheet spread out before them, the cold was something horrible. The night was so dark that it was only the white gleam of the snow that enabled the carriage to proceed at all. "It is impossible," says St. Simon, "to paint the rage and despair of the princess at this wholly unexpected *dénouement* to her plans." It would be extremely disagreeable to describe the sufferings which she must have endured in that horrible journey. On the 23rd of December they left Quadraque; on the 14th of January they arrived at the frontier. During the whole of this time the princess had remained in full court dress, unable to sit or lean back with comfort, half dead with the piercing cold, without proper food, with only scanty and disturbed intervals of sleep. The only wonder is at her advanced age that she arrived alive.

From this moment she vanishes from history. Paris, Holland, Genoa, in turn served her as a temporary resting-place, but her final years were spent at Rome, the scene of her earlier triumphs. She died in 1722. "A few years before," concludes the Duke de St. Simon, "her death would have created a profound sensation in Europe, but then it was barely noticed."

THE EVE OF ST. MICHAEL.

By F. C. ARMSTRONG.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was no possible reason for the train stopping where it did, in the middle of a field, four miles from anywhere; but as we were in Donegal, my mother's country, I felt it would be unwise to show surprise at anything.

The handsome young cousin who came to meet me appeared to be very proud indeed of the wild and lovely land through which we drove for fifteen long miles, before the mountains around my mother's early home came in view. The road wound in and out, by the foot of giant mountains, the side of lovely lakes, sleeping in the glory of a vivid September sun; a land of purple heather, and of far-stretching woods, of rushing rivers, and of luxuriant vegetation, until a sudden turn brought us out upon the shores of that magnificent arm of the great Atlantic, called Donegal Bay.

"Is it not a wild country, Miss Clinton?" asked my cousin Hugh.

"A very lovely country," I replied; "but you forget that I am your Cousin Nora."

He grew red to the roots of his hair.

"I was afraid to call you Nora," he said; "you seem to belong to some other world than ours—you aren't a bit like the rest of us."

I laughed. "I am as Irish as any of you," I said; "your Aunt Nora's daughter, eager to meet all the dear people of whom I have been hearing ever since I was a child."

"I am sure you are like your mother," my cousin said with a look of very outspoken admiration in his bold blue eyes. "She was a great beauty——"

"I have not a trace of resemblance to her," I replied, laughing at his implied compliment. "They say, however, that I am a Vaughan in every feature."

He made some confused reply.

The road, winding along the shores of many a little bay and inlet, became wilder and wilder as we drew near our journey's end; at length, when twilight was closing in, we turned the shoulder of a heath-clad hill, and saw in the valley below, the waving woods and white turrets of Trafinn, the ancient abode of the O'Donnells and now the home of Uncle John Vaughan, my mother's only brother.

Very weird and uncanny in the fading light looked the two

tall towers which flanked the old house, but as we drove up the gravel-sweep, the wide hall door flew open, and a stream of ruddy light poured out upon the steps, down which two lovely young girls rushed to bid me welcome, followed by a handsome middle-aged man, and a beautiful woman, who took me in her arms and called me her "dear child," and I felt I was at home.

The household at Trafinn was somewhat perplexing. Both Uncle and Aunt Vaughan had been previously married, and both had sons by the former unions. Of Mrs. Vaughan's son by her first marriage, Alexander Hervey, I soon heard. I confess my curiosity was aroused by all that his adoring sisters told me concerning him.

There was a delightful novelty about the domestic arrangements at the old house: a disregard of time and space, which amused me. Distance meant nothing. Drives of ten, twenty or thirty miles were held of no account when morning calls or afternoon teas were on foot. There was a charming uncertainty about everything, which made life one continual surprise, and was very pleasant to the town-bred girl, who had been used to a household of clockwork regularity. My bedroom was in one of the two towers, a quaint old room, full of last-century furniture, such as my soul loved.

"We gave you this room, knowing you would like the view," Susy, my youngest cousin, said in her low-toned voice, with the musical cadence in it which ignorant folks call a brogue. "It's all nonsense about the noises—" she paused and her face grew crimson.

"What noises?" I cried eagerly. "Is the room haunted?"

"Oh—it's nothing at all—nothing worth naming," she said.

"But I'd love to think there was a ghost in the castle," I cried. "It would not be complete without one. Do tell me all about it."

"It is really nothing at all—not a ghost, you know," Susy replied, her clear eyes growing troubled. "There have been sounds heard—a beating and a rustling—nothing at all but the echo of the wind, so Alex says."

"Do you mean that these strange sounds have been heard here—in this room?" I asked, sitting upright on the floor, where I had been busily unpacking my boxes; my maid having absolutely refused to accompany me to "the murdering country," as she chose to call this wild north-west of Ireland. "Have you heard them?"

She looked confused.

"Oh, no, the noises—such as they are—are only heard outside; they are in the big old Spanish chest which stands in the passage. I'll show you the queer old thing if you like; it's worth looking at; it came ashore after the Armada—so they say. Indeed it might be any age, and one of the big ships was really wrecked on the coast close by."

"Do let me see it," I cried. "I love those quaint, queer old things, and you seem to have enough to fit out a museum, under this roof."

She rose reluctantly from the contemplation of the treasures contained in the big trunks, which had been the wonder of the household upon the evening of my arrival, and led the way to the gallery upon which one door of my bedroom opened. It was a wide and lofty hall, with wainscoted walls and a groined roof, lit only by narrow slits in the thickness of the wall at one side, through which nothing but a single ray of sunshine could penetrate. The high-pitched roof and dark-toned walls lay in a shadowy twilight, which rendered them strangely ghostly. Below the three narrow windows, a richly carved staircase led to the entrance hall; but Susy told me this part of the house was seldom used, as the winding stairs in the tower corresponding to that occupied by my bedroom, were much more conveniently placed. There was a step leading up from my threshold into the dark, ghostly hall beyond.

"There is a flagged floor under these oak boards," Susy said. "The old chest is fastened to it, otherwise it would have been moved into a better light, as it is such a rare old thing; but you can't see it without a lamp. Just wait a moment and I'll fetch one."

She ran off, and left me standing beside a huge object which filled a recess in the oak-panelled wall, and which I could feel was richly carved in low relief. How long I stood thus, with my hand resting upon the lid of the Spanish chest, I know not. It must have been for several minutes. I heard doors open and close in the hall below; and voices—then—was I dreaming, or did a strange face peer at me through the obscurity around and gradually grow upon me from the shadow opposite? It was a man's face. A face of strange and unfamiliar type, such as one sees looking out from some old Venetian canvas. I held my breath. If this was the outward similitude of the ghost which haunted Trafinn there was nothing very terrible in its aspect. Yet I must confess that as it drew nearer to me, I shrunk back, and my lips parted to utter a cry. But it was a warm, strong human hand which caught my arm, and a mellow human voice which said in my ears, "I beg your pardon—the darkness deceived me," as a flash of red light fell upon us, and Susy with a lamp in her hand appeared behind.

"Alex—my heart's delight. What sky have you dropped from?" she cried as she set the lamp upon the old chest and threw her arms around her brother.

"No sky at all," he answered. "I came home on Bob Galaher's car. Why did you not send to meet me? Have you not had my letter?"

"Never a letter. We haven't sent for the mail bag for three

days. I suppose it's at the lodge. Patsey can go for it; but you are a thousand times more welcome than if we had been expecting you."

He laughed.

"I suspected there was something astray," he said. "I could not find a creature in the yard—so I thought to creep upon you all unawares and had a start myself." He turned towards me with a radiant smile. "I hope I did not frighten you," he said. "I took you for the ghost. When I saw the white figure standing beside the haunted chest, I thought here is the solution to the mystery—if indeed there be any mystery to solve."

"And were you disappointed to find it was only a woman of flesh and blood?" I asked laughingly.

"Not certainly disappointed," he replied quickly. "Although I had not heard you had arrived, I at once guessed who you were."

"Nora," cried Susy gaily, "you must be great friends with Alexander the Great, so called by his adoring sisters."

"These girls do their best to spoil me," he said with his bright look. "I hope they have not been telling you tales of me."

We did not examine the old chest then, or for a long time afterwards.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT a gay time it was. Every day there was something to be done in the way of amusement. A pic-nic or tennis party, a dinner or a dance, either at the houses of the hospitable folks living within reach, or at Trafinn, where Uncle John was never half so happy as when he was entertaining the country side. When was it that the consciousness that my cousin Hugh liked me a great deal better than I cared to be liked, came upon me? I scarcely know. I remember his making a scene at a tennis party, and how annoyed I felt afterwards. I lay awake that night, pondering over his folly. Through the hush of the silent time I heard, or thought I heard, a sound, which, albeit, soft and low, yet made itself audible with strange power. It sounded like the beating of a feeble hand upon some hollow substance. Faint, far off it seemed—beat—beat—beat—now slowly—now rapidly; louder for an instant, then fainter and fainter, as if the beater's strength failed and failed. A sound as of some heavy silken garment slipping to the floor, and then—silence. I sat up in my huge bed and listened breathlessly, but the noises had ceased. Outside I heard the murmur of the wind change to a moan and the voices of the waves grow louder. In the farmyard the cocks began to crow and a dog bayed. Shivering, but not from cold, I arose from my bed and made my way to a window. With trembling hand I put aside the heavy draperies and looked out into the night. Over the sea the pallid dawn was breaking cold and grey; upon the window panes a driving mist of

rain was falling. I stood looking across the dim stretch of moving waters until, chilled to the bone, I crept back to bed, and lay waking until the cold faint light of a wet autumnal morning filled the quaint old chamber from end to end.

When I awoke it was high day, but the rain was dashing against the windows and the wind howling in the trees. Upon the strand the waves were leaping and tossing in flurried masses of dull gloomy grey. The mountains had retreated into an impenetrable mist, and I knew we were doomed to endure the miseries of a real Irish wet day. Susy's bright face was the only blink of sunshine to be seen, as I shook off the chill of my sleepless night, and roused myself to face the day.

"It's hours past breakfast time," she said with her radiant smile. "I would not let Lizzie wake you. You were sleeping so soundly. You were very tired yesterday."

I replied that I had been very tired—too tired to sleep. And then I told her what I had heard in the still watches of the night. Her round eyes grew rounder and her rosy cheeks pale as I spoke.

"Oh, Nora, surely you were mistaken," she cried. "It could only have been the wind in the trees, or the old flagstaff waving about. Listen! you can hear it this moment."

But I assured her that the sounds which had startled me in the silence of night, did not in the least resemble the measured "thud" of the ancient mast, which, loose in its socket, moved to and fro as the wet west wind broke in wild gusts upon the tower.

"Alex sleeps upon this floor. I'll ask him if he heard anything," she cried. "But in the meantime, see the lovely breakfast I have provided for you."

Much against my inclination, she compelled me to taste the dainties she had brought with her own kind hands, and almost in spite of myself, I felt constrained to acknowledge that they did me good.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN we all met at luncheon I felt a curious shrinking from the remembrance of what I had heard in the night. I was sorry I had confided it to Susy, who had apparently told her brother, because more than once I caught his eyes fixed upon me, as if he wished to read my thoughts. I do not think I ever saw eyes like Alex Hervey's. There is an Irish saying about the beauty of eyes the "colour of bog water," and only those who know the peculiar tinge of the streams which dance down the mountain sides in wild Donegal can understand the comparison. It is brown, but brown dashed with gold, and full of depth—the depth of a still lake; his eyes were of that colour. Hugh Vaughan was a handsome youth, a very handsome youth indeed, but his face lacked the subtle

charm, the soul which spoke in every line of the other's face. I think the contrast between the men never struck me so forcibly as upon this wet afternoon. It hurt me, and I could have been cross with the boy, who as I knew, was already my bond-slave.

With the fall of the tide, the weather improved.

"Are you afraid to venture out, Miss Clinton?" It was Captain Hervey who suggested it. "The river will be at its best after this heavy rain. Suppose we go and look at it? The falls are sometimes quite wonderful, and as the floods come from the mountains the beauty of them only lasts for an hour or so; the waters going down almost as fast as they rise."

"And," cried both of the sisters, "weather never frightened us in 'Ould Donegal.'"

In a very short time we were out upon the steps ready to start. Susy and Cassy, neat and trim figures, clad in the grey tweed of the country, while I was buttoned up in a London mackintosh. As we left the door, half-a-dozen dogs came bounding towards us with yelps and barks of high delight, and a moment afterwards, their master, Hugh, appeared round a corner of the house.

"Hallo, girls, where are you dragging Cousin Nora?" he demanded brusquely, his face clouding as he saw Alex at my side. "Don't you see she isn't fit to face this wild climate? She is not able to tramp through the wet like you two, you pair of mountain ponies."

The laugh which accompanied his words rang unpleasantly in my ears.

"I am neither sugar or salt, Hugh," I replied, making a step towards him. "A slight wetting will do me no harm, and see, am I not well prepared for all weathers?" and I shook the cape of my waterproof before his eyes.

"You must run no risks while you are in my charge," he replied with an angry glow flashing into his eyes. "I won't have you laid up; you were tired yesterday; you must rest to-day."

"My dear Hugh, I am not in anybody's charge," I answered, feeling my face grow hot. "I am going to see the waterfall; will you come too?"

He growled something about my having a sufficient escort, but, whistling to the dogs, joined our party.

We were not, however, destined to see the waterfall then, because, just as we reached the gate of the avenue, a carriage appeared in sight. It contained a bevy of guests on their way to the house, and very reluctantly we returned with them.

The arrivals were relatives of Mrs. Vaughan's, old acquaintances and tried friends. They were also kind and hospitable people, who at once invited me to their home under the shadow of Slieve League, the King of the Donegal Mountains. The daughter of the family had a fair knowledge of palmistry, which made our evening pass pleasantly enough, while the wind raged and howled

outside, the rain fell in cataracts, and the furious waves raved upon the shore, for with the night and the rising tide, a fierce tempest burst upon us in its madness and all the force of the autumnal equinox.

We sat comfortably around the blazing hearth, while Miss Manders examined our hands, and pronounced upon our characters with no small amount of success. She traced out long and fair lines of life for the two bright young girls, telling how, with one sister, the head dominated the heart, and with the other, the heart the head; foresaw happy careers for them both, with no greater joys and sorrows in their paths than fall to the common lot. Then my turn came.

She held my hand, and examined it with much closer care than she had bestowed upon the rosy palms of the sisters; more than once she lifted her penetrating eyes to my face, as if she sought in my features confirmation of what she read in the hand she held. "Have you ever been made aware of the fact that you yourself possess psychical powers to no small degree?" she asked, retaining my fingers in her own. I replied that I was not conscious of possessing powers of any kind, feeling a very great inclination to treat the whole thing as a jest. Not satisfied with the uncertain light from the hearth, she drew me out of the merry circle round it, and standing in a remote corner of the room, where a tall lamp gave light to the piano, she peered anxiously at the lines crossing and re-crossing my palm.

"Have you ever been in great danger?" she asked me; "of some peculiar kind—I cannot tell its character—it may be of accident or storm—shipwreck, perhaps—I am rather confused about it. I wish I knew more of the science; your hand perplexes me so—it is full of very uncommon lines, yet your line of life is clear, and goes to the full length; you have the 'bracelets' which portend long life, success and happiness. I can see also the stars indicating a brilliant and exceedingly happy marriage."

I made some light answer—I cannot quite remember what I said; but she continued her research.

"Hitherto, you have had only one great sorrow," she went on; "it proceeded from a loss by death."

This was true. I had never known a grief until two years before, when I stood beside my mother's grave. The wound was not as yet healed. I think she felt that she had pained me, for she clasped my hand more closely.

"And," she went on, "although your fancy has been excited more than once, you have as yet never felt the touch of real love. That is still to come, and at no distant date, if I can judge aright; but it is all mixed up with your psychic powers, and this strange accident—I feel so confused and perplexed I cannot read the lines clearly; but I think that the love and the danger are both close at hand."

She had been speaking low, but as I looked up, I saw that her words reached other ears than my own. Alex Hervey was standing at my side. Our eyes met.

CHAPTER IV.

ALL that night, all the next day, the storm raged on, rendering the Manders' departure an impossibility; but although we were compelled to find our pastime within doors, we had no more pal-mistry. It was only on the third day of the tempest that the winds abated sufficiently to admit of our guests' return home. At the time I scarcely observed it; but afterwards I had reason to recall the circumstance. As Miss Manders bade me good-bye, she looked long and earnestly into my face, saying never a word. Possibly she had read something in my hand which she feared to tell me.

"Now for the waterfall." It was Hugh himself who proposed the expedition. The rain had ceased, there were vivid bursts of sunshine casting intensest glories upon the rugged hills, and laying flying gleams of gold on the wind-tossed bay. Broken weather in the wild west of Donegal gives lights and shadows, flashes of a loveliness which must be seen to be realized, such as calmer skies deny. We were a merry party setting out upon our tramp. The path wound up the mountain, through wet woods, just touched here and there by the "fiery finger" of approaching autumn. At every turn of way we caught glimpses of the shining waters of the bay below, or of the brown mountain-peaks, tangled in flying clouds overhead. As we emerged from the woods and came out upon the heathery slope beyond, the path became more difficult of ascent and the scene around us more savage in its grandeur.

"Come on, Nora," cried Hugh; "I'll show you a sight you won't soon forget. It's a stiff climb; but I'll take care of you." He seized my hand, and hurried me along a steep path which led straight up the mountain-side. I heard Alex's voice raised in what seemed expostulation, but Hugh took no heed; he only hastened his pace, compelling me to follow.

"Come on," he whispered, drawing me up the incline. "I have not had a word with you for an age. I must be the one to show you the beauty of my own place. You must love it—I want you to love it." His voice sounded wild and strange; there was a tone in it which I did not care to hear. I began to wish that the girls had not dropped so far behind.

I told him, however, that I loved my mother's country already; and following him up the last almost precipitous bit of the steep, stood upon the verge of the waterfall.

For a moment I held my breath, awe-stricken by the sight which burst upon me. The torrent, forced into a narrow channel above, came thundering down a rift in the mountain-side—a sheet

of flying foam, leaping from ledge to ledge of fern-clad rock, falling with deafening clamour into a deep ravine below, through which the mad waters tore, seething and raving, out of sight.

We were standing on a small patch of green, close to the foot of the fall; the spray blew on our faces, the roar of the river made speech impossible. To my great annoyance, Hugh, retaining his hold upon my hand, tried to draw me closer to him. I held back.

"Are the others coming?" I shrieked, trying to look as if I had not noticed his gesture.

For answer, he cast an arm around me and said in my ears, "I hope they are not coming—that they will never come. I want to have you to myself for a moment. When they are by, they are eternally coming between us. Don't you know that I love you, Nora—Nora?"

I was both frightened and indignant. There was something in the boy's voice and eyes which alarmed me. I had more than once heard men say that they loved me, but in a very different fashion, and the wildness of the scene—the utter loneliness of it—seemed terrible.

"Hugh, I am astonished at you," I cried, scarcely hearing my voice above the roar of the torrent. "This is not either the time or place to speak to me like this. Let me go; I will not listen to you until we are safe on the path again."

"I will not take you back. I will not suffer you to leave this spot until you promise to listen to me—until you give me a hope that some time or other you will do more than listen."

He was holding me tightly, and in his strong grasp I felt utterly powerless, when to my infinite delight a shout rang through the air; but the next moment all thoughts—all powers of thought—were swallowed up in overwhelming terror. Down the face of the fall came a wave of blackness, hurling along with it rock, tree and tangled mass of earth, which hung above our heads for one brief instant, and then was whirled out of sight, leaving a barrier of fallen tree and earth-stained stone across the mouth of the chasm, and flooding the spot where we two stood, almost knee-deep. I felt that here was the end of the life which so short a time ago had been promised length of days and a fair future. The mass of fallen earth before us, blocking effectually the path by which we had reached the fall, and the wild waters pouring down upon us in such masses as to threaten the very ground beneath our feet. I saw the horror in my companion's eyes, and felt he knew there was no way of escape.

"Poor Hugh," I whispered. He could only have seen my lips move; no sound could have reached him through the mad clamour of wind and waters.

He clasped me close. "At least we can die together," he gasped in my ear; but the end was not yet. I tried to free myself from his grasp and look round, and then—Was it then I felt my whole

heart go out to him, as I saw the face which had shone upon me in the darkness of the haunted room break through the mist of foam and spray around us, and I felt that there was help at hand? There were other faces behind—other strong hands tearing at the land-slip, and striving to reach us, before another mass of earth came crashing down the falls; but I saw only the love and terror for my sake in those wonderful eyes—felt that in his presence there was safety. I never doubted it from the moment I saw him; but it was a close wrestle with a fearful death. The wild waters were foaming round my waist as Hugh with shaking hands fastened the rope which Alex flung to him. A false step might have hurled me over the steep, but the false step was not taken—the strong rope held. My dress was torn to fragments, and my shoes rent from my feet; but safe in every limb I was drawn from the jaws of death, and clasped in the powerful arms of him whose promptitude saved me. Following us up the steep, he had observed a mass of darkness rolling down the heights above the falls at a furious pace. Instantly realizing the danger, he had shouted to some men whom he saw working at the roof of the only cottage on that part of the mountain, and hurried to the place where he knew Hugh had taken me. He came in time to save me. I had no words left in which to thank him. I could only look into his face; perhaps it was enough. He bore me in his arms to the little cottage on the hill-side.

“You will be safe here until the girls send help from the house,” he said. “They ran back when they saw the danger.”

The cottage was warm and comfortable; the good mistress of it welcomed me with a torrent of thanksgiving for my marvellous escape. Her nimble hands soon released me from the dragged remnants of my garments still clinging to me; and, clad in her Sunday gown, I sat by the blazing hearth, only too thankful to feel myself alive.

“An’ sure, it’s the wonder o’ the world my man and Joseph wor at the place at all,” she said. “Only that the mather gev them leave to come an’ mend the roof that was tore in the big win’ (great storm), there wouldn’t ha’ been a crater about the place but myself an’ grannie.”

I said I had every reason to be thankful for my most providential escape.

“Who spoke?” cried a voice from the obscurity beyond the hearth.

“Whist, grannie,” said my hostess; “sure it’s the young lady from the Castle; she’s been near drowned in the flood.”

Out of the darkness emerged a tall gaunt figure, clad in rusty black. The drawn, lined face was quivering with emotion; the aged eyes went round the narrow space as if seeking for light; the withered hands were stretched out in passionate appeal.

“Don’t I know it’s herself,” she cried. “For the love o’ God,

stand out into the light until I see the face I never thought to see again in flesh and blood. My lovely Miss Nora, is it come from your place in glory to see her that loved you you are, or is it to tell me my time is at hand?"

Startled as I felt, there was something in her voice which I could not refuse to answer.

"My name is Nora Clinton," I said, speaking slowly and distinctly. "I was never in Ireland before. You are mistaking me for some one else, my friend."

"Ay, it's your own voice, you darlin' o' all the world. Is it down from the heights o' heaven you've come to call me to wait on you abow? Nora Vaughan, that I followed to the churchyard seventy long year ago, whin I was but a young wife with my first child at my breast? an' is this what I've been waiting on all these years? Come into the light till I see you, my beauty, an' it's thankful I'll pass away."

The aged face which emerged from the shadows was quivering with emotion, and the skinny hands trembled as they grasped my arms. She was an old, a very old woman, with a certain air of refinement and culture around her, strange to find in a mountain sheeling.

The keen eyes scanned my face.

"Young and fair," she muttered; "an' me so aged and broken. They keep their beauty in the presence o' the angels. An' is it to tell me you have found your man and the child they tore from you long ago, when they broke your heart, that you come to the one that loved you well out of your place?"

The young woman bustled forward.

"Ah, it's daft you are, grannie woman," she cried. "Sure it's Miss Clinton, the masther's niece, that's in it; an' hasn't she come through enough o' distress this blessed day without your scarin' the life in her?"

With a commanding gesture the old woman put her aside.

"Well do I know what I am sayin'," she said. "Here's the face I knew, an' the shape like a willow wand, an' the voice that them who heard it never forgot; but I know it cannot be my darling that I saw laid in the churchyard. It's her spirit come back in a fair young form to live the life that was tore from her long ago."

The light in her wild eyes faded, she released my arms and fell back into the shadow.

"Don't mind her, miss," whispered my hostess; "it's full o' notions she does be by times. She's nigh hand a hundred year old, an' great troubles she had long ago. 'Tis light in the head she does get wid thinkin' on them."

"I'm not light in the head, Peter's wife," said the old voice from the corner; "but the ways o' them above is hard to understand. It's back to earth they have let her come to live the life o' joy that

was rent from her by cruel hands ; the love an' the happiness that was denied her then ; an' God is good to let me see that same before I go to find her an' him an' the sinless little one that was slain by wicked hands, in the courts o' heaven." She tossed her withered hands above her head. "Ah," she cried in her piercing voice, "it will not be long. I'll be with them all before the snows are down."

"Sit up to the fire, miss, agraph. Sure it's sorry I am to see the ould woman put you into such a flustration ; it's an ould story she does be commin' over now an' thin when the fit's upon her, so it is. I never could get my man to tell me the right way o' it." And my good hostess hurried me back to my seat by the fire. I was dazed and overstrained. The fearful danger through which I had passed, the strange words of the old woman, and above all the unaccountable response to them which I felt stirring in my own soul, came upon me with overwhelming force. I bowed my head upon my hands and wept. Through my sobs I heard the voice of the good woman remonstrating with me. "Aragh, whisht, now, miss, darlin'," she was saying ; "sure, don't I see the captain comin' up the hill safe an' sound, glory be to God. An' won't it be the poor thing for him to find you with the tears in your eyes ? Oh, the weary's on you, grannie, to go an' put the soul so 'through other,' an' her but out o' the jaws o' death."

Then there was a firm step on the floor, and a voice in my ears, which sent the warm blood flying to my heart.

"Are you sufficiently recovered to come home ?" Alex said in the tone that was the sweetest music in the world to me. "We have brought the pony. Will you trust yourself with me ?"

I gasped out something and rose to my feet. Suddenly a wild laugh rang through the place, and the old woman sprang from her nook in the darkness.

"I knew it ; I knew it," she cried with a ring of triumphant joy in her broken voice ; "the one would never be let come back without the other. The mate that was lost in the old life is back with you in the new, my darlin'. May the blessin' o' her that's bound for death be wid ye both, Nora Vaughan an' Alexander Iccardi, that I seen married in the ould church at the dead hour o' night, when I was young and fair myself, an' had my sweetheart as well as the best."

"But I am not Signor Iccardi ; only his grand-nephew," Alex said, while the hand which held mine trembled. "You forget, my good woman."

"No, I don't forget. You are of his blood, an' the spirit that was in him is in your soul this minute. Isn't this the Eve of the blessed St. Michael ? Seventy year ago, this day, she was took from yez—and isn't she come back for yez now, as you're come back for her ? The spirit that would ha' come between yez will trouble yez no more. The eyes o' them that's bound for death

get clear sight o' the ways o' heaven. Go, yez wor med for other, an' the joy that's before yez if yez win through this day an' night is more than words can tell."

I did not dare to look into his face. The younger woman broke the spell of strange embarrassment which fell upon us.

"Troth, I'm just burnin' wid shame to think o' the way the grannie has bothered your ladyship wid her ould clavers. 'Tis near the full o' the moon it is, an' the likes o' her do be always quare them times," she said. Alex muttered something about not minding the poor old soul; but the consciousness of having heard her wild speech was between us as I mounted the rough, surefooted little pony waiting for me, and in my heart there was a stirring of vague memories never felt before, as I rode down the steep path, with the man whom I was learning to love holding my bridle-rein.

We said not a word to each other. It seemed as if speech between us was impossible. Yet the air around us felt loaded with fate, and the dread of some impending evil was upon me.

As I rode into the courtyard of the old house, I understood the full extent of the tragedy at the falls. The bright lad whose wild love had grieved and frightened me would trouble me no more. Hugh Vaughan had not escaped the flood.

CHAPTER V.

IN all their sorrow they thought of me, and Susy or her mother sat with me by turns, not talking much, but soothing me by their gentle presence.

It was late when they left me, but later still when my overwrought nerves quieted even a little, and I lay down to court the refreshing slumber of which I stood so much in need. But the moment I laid my head upon the pillow all inclination to sleep forsook me. I lay with surging brain, not thinking of the terrible danger through which I had passed, the affliction which had fallen upon my uncle's house, or the wild words of the old woman; not even of the eyes which had looked love upon me in my hour of utmost need; but of Miss Manders' curious expression as she bade me farewell. Her searching eyes seemed to peer at me through the dim half-light in my room; I could almost fancy I heard her voice in my ears, asking me if I knew that I possessed psychic powers to a great degree, and, what I was at a loss to understand, if I remembered that it was St. Michael's Eve? It was more than strange. I felt another voice responding to hers, a voice from some unknown inner self; a something which her words had roused into being, and which I could not choose but hear. How long this condition of spirit lasted I know not. I may have drifted into unconsciousness, trance, call it by what name you will; but

as I lay, dead to the outer world, with every nerve quivering into an intenser life, the sensation came upon me of a newly-awakened self within me, which struggled for existence, expression, and rent me with swift and sudden pain. I became aware of a face gazing upon me through the dimness of the chamber: my own face, looking at me as if from a mirror, with sorrow unspeakable in the eyes of it. Hands fashioned like my own were beckoning me with gestures of passionate appeal. I fought with the vision, striving with all my might to resist its power, but my strength was as nothing against the force which drew me on and on. I felt slipping away from myself and becoming incorporated with that thing which was me and yet not me, partaking of the anguish in its eyes as if that had been an unacknowledged portion of my being from my birth. Slowly, like some long buried memory struggling back to life, the thought behind those wild eyes passed into my soul. I could not help myself. I rose up and followed the beckoning hand. There was a sense of awe and mystery upon me, but no fear. I had in my soul the knowledge that I was living through a part of my past life, which I knew as it came to me, only the remembrance of it had been blurred by some heavy cloud which was now lifting and passing away. Through the rush and roar of the tempest I heard the sound of that hand, which I knew now was my own hand, beat, beat upon the lid of the chest outside, in which was hidden the secret I craved to know: that secret which was the life of my life, the joy of my heart; something which was part of me, and yet I knew not how. Would the knowledge grow clearer if I went to it and lifted the lid? I have no recollection of how I gained the gallery. A pale glimmer of light filled it from end to end. There were two figures there, a man and a woman, whom I felt that I had known and feared in that mysterious past which was returning to my memory with such force. The man was fastening down the lid of the chest, the woman standing by, with an evil smile upon a face which would have been handsome but for the cruelty of it. I saw myself dash forward, saw my feeble hands rend and tear at the heavy lock, felt my utter impotence to move the massive lid, and an overwhelming agony compelled me to utter shriek upon shriek, which rang wildly through the vaulted roof. The rest is darkness.

* * * *

When I recovered I was lying upon my bed, with anxious faces bent above me, and the sun was shining clear into the room.

CHAPTER VI.

I do not know what name they gave the illness which fell upon me after that terrible night. I only know that for days and days I

hovered between life and death, and that when I was able to crawl down stairs, I looked years older than I had done when I arrived in Ireland. Through it all, I had upon me a curious sense of a dual personality—a living self linked to a dead past—and of a secret lying in my heart, which I could not recall.

"We must get you back to London, my dear," said the good old family doctor, who had watched over me through all. "After such a shock to your nervous system, complete change is the only thing to restore its tone."

We are alone together, and suddenly the desire to confide in him the singular sensations which still oppressed me came upon me; he was an old friend of the family, knew the history of it. Possibly he might be able to throw some light upon the mystery of the old chest, and the vision which had almost unsettled my reason. I told him everything.

He listened with a deeper interest than I had expected.

"Have you never heard any stories connected with the family?" he asked; "did old Ellen not give you a hint of what she meant? She knows more of the tragic tale than any one."

I said no.

"It is very singular, very," he said; "but I think the best thing I can do is, tell you the story, at least as near as I know, of the Nora Vaughan, whom the old woman says you resemble. She was an orphan and an heiress, left in the care of the only unpopular Vaughan that ever lived in Trafinn; a wild, dissipated fellow, who had married beneath him—a woman of no character. There was a son. Well, we Irish are, I dare say, too strait-laced about some things, and young Hugh was held to have no right to his father's name. The worthy pair settled that the heiress was to marry this lad, a low-lived fellow, the ringleader of all the turbulent spirits in the country. By the way, the old people used to say the poor lad who was taken from us so recently, resembled him in many respects." The old doctor sunk his voice as he spoke. "But the girl chose for herself. One of the Herveys had married a Venetian lady, and her brother Alessandro Iccardi came to visit his sister in her western home. It was a case of love at first sight. Nora Vaughan was as lovely as the day, and the young Italian one of the handsomest fellows possible. There were great difficulties in the way; but love laughs at such trifles, and the pair made a moonlight flitting of it; aided thereto by Ellen O'Donnell, the old woman who mistook you for her young lady. Of course the Vaughans made a terrible rumpus; said the marriage was illegal, would not permit Nora to be called by her husband's name, and refused to give the girl possession of her own house. At length, Iccardi appealed to the Chancellor—the worst thing he could do—and Vaughan got an injunction to retain 'his ward' at Trafinn until she came of age. There was but little law in Donegal when the century was in its teens.

In the midst of it all, a son was born to the young pair, a splendid boy, beautiful as an angel; and Nora was as happy as a queen. Iccardi, never dreaming that ill could befall his wife, went to visit his relations in Italy, resolving to return and claim her and his boy when the year that would set her free went by. One day the child disappeared in the most unaccountable way; the poor mother went raving mad, and drowned herself in the very stream from which you had so narrow an escape. Curiously enough, it was also upon Michaelmas Eve."

The old man was startled by the cry which rang from my lips. In a flash as of lurid flame, the whole dark story was made plain to me. They had slain her child, those two; murdered it and hidden the little body in that old chest. She had come upon them red handed, and the sight had driven her mad. It was her unquiet spirit which beat, and beat upon the lid of the unballowed tomb where she knew her little one was lying. What wonder was it that she could not rest until the crime was revealed, and the poor remains of her own flesh and blood laid beside her in consecrated earth? I begged and implored the good old man to go that instant and wrench from the chest its awful secret. It was with a very solemn face that he went.

CHAPTER VII.

UNCLE JOHN at once consented to have the chest opened in his presence. They never told me exactly what they found. I only know it was enough to confirm all suspicions as to the guilt of the pair, who had left no one behind them to be shamed by the revelation of their crime. It was Alex Hervey who saw that the poor relics of mortality were safely and reverently laid at rest in the old churchyard, and it was he who sought out old Ellen O'Donnell, and told her what had been done. Perhaps she knew better than any person upon earth the whole of the dark story, but she is beyond all questioning now. She died, as she had herself foretold, before the first snow fell; taking along with her whatever knowledge she possessed.

I left Ireland as soon as I was able to travel, and in the spring of the young year, I became Alex Hervey's wife.

* * * * *

Last September we revisited the old place, where things have not altered much, only Uncle John has grown aged and grey. Aunt Vaughan—my mother now—has only ripened as the years go by. The two girls have lived the happy life foreseen for them upon that stormy evening years ago. They are both happily married. We all met under the old roof, and had many pleasant memories to recall, but never once did we mention the weird

mystery of my first visit. It is a page in my history better left in oblivion. The whole of the events of that strange time are so inexplicable that I know not what to believe. All I am sure of is, that what the aged woman told me has come to pass, and that my happiness is more than words can tell. Perhaps it is true that I am living a double life of love and joy, and that the spirit of my unfortunate ancestress is tasting through me all that she was robbed of in her brief and sorrowful life. I cannot tell, but I know that there has never been a shadow upon me since the day I became Alex Hervey's wife; nor have I ever had the slightest indication of the occult powers which I was told were in me, since the unquiet spirit of Nora Vaughan was laid at rest.

A NEW OTHELLO.

A NOVEL.

By IZA DUFFUS HARDY,

AUTHOR OF "LOVE, HONOUR AND OBEY," "NOT EASILY JEALOUS," "ONLY A LOVE STORY,"
"LOVE IN IDLENESS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XXII.

AS A BOLT OUT OF THE BLUE.

"One hour
Ripened the deadly fruit of that fell flower!"

A MELANCHOLY morning dawned upon the family circle whom the past day's close had left all happy and at peace—on whom this unexpected and disastrous calamity had fallen on a sudden, like a bolt out of the blue. Eileen had only recovered from one swoon to fall into another. Kate was with her, but Kate was not of very much use as a nurse; she was utterly broken down. They had scarcely expected from Kate such an intense anguish of terror and emotion as she had manifested. May, worn out with weeping, lay exhausted on her bed. Mrs. Percival, herself bearing up bravely for the sake of others, had been attending to May, but had just left her for awhile, in order to ask the doctor, whom she had not yet seen alone, the questions she had been anxiously waiting to put.

"What kind of a seizure was it, Dr. Treherne? Was it a fit? and what could have brought it on?"

"It was not a fit," he replied gravely. "I am very sorry, my dear Mrs. Percival, to have to tell you that the cause of Mr. Carresford's death was *poison*."

"Poison? Geoffrey, my brother, *poisoned*? Impossible!"

"I regret to say it is true beyond doubt. The appearances are unmistakable; besides, the traces of poison are still to be found in the glass from which he drank."

"How—how *could* it have happened?"

Dr. Treherne was silent a minute, looking very serious; then he inquired.

"Was there, so far as you are aware, anything on Mr. Carresford's mind? Had he any trouble likely to prey on him?"

"None; nothing. He was the happiest man in England, of the brightest, most sanguine disposition. His life was without a cloud. He was to be married in less than three weeks; we were all going back to town next week to prepare for the wedding."

"It is a sad affair. In my opinion the circumstances of his death do not point to the fatal dose being intentionally self-administered. It would seem as if, on feeling the effects of the poison, which must have been instantaneous, he rushed to the door either for help or for air, as the symptoms are those of sudden suffocation. He must have been standing nearer to the door than the window; the glass was found near the door, just as he had evidently dropped it. The resistance to the poison, the struggle for life, implied by his rushing to the door, certainly tend against the theory of suicide."

Mary Percival shuddered and buried her face in her hands as he thus described her brother's tragic end.

"Suicide is an impossible—impossible theory!" she said as soon as she could command her voice to speak. "Geoffrey was the happiest man, with the healthiest tone of mind! It must have been some terrible fatality of accident. That medicine he was taking at night—could there have been any mistake of the chemist's in making it up?"

"Scarcely possible; but I have sent to the chemist's. The theory of accident does not seem to me at present at all warranted. I think it only right to ask you whether, to your knowledge, any one bore ill-will or malice, or had any reason for bearing ill-will, against Mr. Carresford?"

"No one; not a soul. Every one who knew my brother loved him; even strangers liked him; he had not an enemy in the world."

"Apart from any matter of ill-will, had any one any interest in his death?"

"In Geoffrey's death? Not a living creature. Who *could* have?"

"I hope, my dear madam, that under the circumstances you will not think me intruding into your family affairs if I venture to inquire who is Mr. Carresford's next heir?—for he ought to be communicated with," he added hastily, and assuming a more indifferent air and tone.

"My son is his heir, as he has left no children," Mrs. Percival replied quite innocently.

"Yes, yes; to be sure, of course. Any other near relatives?"

"Our sister, Miss Carresford—there were only the three of us—and my daughter, are the only near relatives who are not here, and I am sending for them."

The doctor nodded approval.

"There will have to be an inquiry into the cause of death, of course," he observed. "The police inspector will be here soon to investigate the case."

"But what can it be?" Mary Percival exclaimed in utter perplexity. "What poison was it?"

"Hydrocyanic acid."

"Hydrocyanic acid?" she repeated, looking up a little startled

"Yes. Are you aware if Mr. Carresford had any in his possession?" he asked quickly.

"No; but I fancy that was the name of the stuff Ray, my boy, wanted to kill his dog with."

"So I understood. I—er—heard it mentioned. Mr. Percival, then, had some in *his* possession?"

"I think he got some for the dog."

"Did he give it to the dog?"

"I don't know. I should think not. The dog is dead. Poor Ponto! He was found dead this morning, I hear, but I don't know whether my son gave him the dose. I think Ray has been too much occupied and upset all this morning to go out to the stables. He is terribly cut up, poor boy!"

"Naturally; naturally. Where is he now?"

"Downstairs, writing and sending off telegrams."

There was a knock at the door, and Mr. Jackson, the proprietor of the hotel, appeared, and after saluting Mrs. Percival with the most respectful sympathy, informed Dr. Treherne that the police inspector had arrived; also the Meriton general practitioner, Dr. Fosse, and they wished to see Dr. Treherne.

Presently Ray, having sent off his letters and telegrams, returned upstairs to the family sitting-room, where he found, and even in that sad hour was glad to find, Mrs. Fitzallan with his mother. Then Kate and Eileen came in, Kate looking pitifully pale and agitated, Eileen silent, almost speechless, white and wan, her great dark eyes dilated with a strange look of wondering questioning, as if she could hardly believe in the reality of their loss. Ray could not help even then observing how gentle, helpful, and tender Asenath was to each and all of these sorrowing women. He was unutterably shocked and horrified, as were they all, by the mysterious cause of Geoffrey's untimely death. He sat down by his mother, who clung to him as her only comfort; and after awhile, which seemed a long while to these troubled hearts—for to us all sad hours seem long—there came another knock at the door, and the proprietor of the hotel again appeared, with an apology for intrusion, but the inspector wished to speak to Mr. Percival.

"Certainly," said Ray, promptly rising and stepping to the door.

The police inspector was close at hand behind Mr. Jackson, and behind him again were Dr. Treherne, Dr. Fitzallan, the Meriton Dr. Fosse and Mr. Bartram, while it seemed that half the establishment of waiters and chambermaids were hanging about the corridor and staircases. The inspector saluted Ray formally, and proceeded directly to business.

"I understand, sir, you made a purchase of some poison—hydrocyanic acid—yesterday at the chemist's, for the purpose of destroying a dog?"

"I did."

"Did you give the animal the whole quantity of the poison you had procured?"

"I gave it none; the dog was better when I returned. It has since died."

"Then you are still in possession of the poison?"

"Yes."

"I must ask if you will please to show me the bottle, sir?"

"Certainly; it is in my room."

Ray gave his answers clearly and readily, but he felt a little uneasiness at the curious coincidence of Geoffrey having died from the effects of the same kind of poison he had bought for his dog, although he could see no possible means by which that dose could have been in any way connected with Geoffrey's death. He led the way to his room; the whole group followed after him, and the inspector entered with him. He took a key from his breast-pocket, unlocked his desk, and put his hand towards the back of it to feel amongst the loose papers for the little bottle. The inspector kept close beside him meanwhile.

"You are in the habit of keeping your desk locked, sir?"

"Not always; sometimes. I am not generally very careful about it."

"I think I ought to take charge of that bottle, sir," said the inspector.

"Certainly."

Ray handed the phial to him, without the close and critical observation which the police officer immediately bestowed upon it. The label wrapt round it entirely covered the little bottle; the inspector slightly shook it and held it up to the light.

"It is empty," he then said.

These three little words sent a thrill of excitement through all the group. As to Ray himself, they fairly took his breath away; and guilt itself could not have turned more ghastly pale than he did then, for his quick and sensitive apprehension realized on the instant the suspicion to which this discovery might expose him; his vivid imagination pictured to him in a flash the revolting horror of such a suspicion, however vague, being even for a moment attached to *him*—Geoffrey's nearest, dearest comrade and kinsman!

"Empty! Impossible! It has been locked up here," he protested, with the huskiness of sudden emotion in his voice.

"Locked up all the time since you bought it?"

"Yes. At least, ever since I took it out of my pocket."

"Had you it with you when you were in Mr. Carresford's room last night?" inquired Mr. Bartram, pushing to the front.

"I was *not* in his room last night."

"Not?" queried Mr. Bartram; and Ray was aware of certain dubious, serious looks exchanged amongst the group.

"No, he was out all the evening and did not return till three o'clock this morning."

"And were you not then in his room during his absence?"

"No," said Ray, and suddenly stopped short on the word, as he remembered that he *had* passed through Geoffrey's room in order to prevent Dr. Fitzallan's finding him in *tête-à-tête* conversation with Asenath on the balcony. Yes, and he had lingered there a few minutes in the dark, thinking; but to his knowledge no one had seen him go out, as no one but Asenath could have seen him go in. He was conscious in every nerve, without actually *seeing* them, of the expressive looks amongst the little circle of men around him.

"I think under these distressing circumstances," observed Mr. Bartram importantly, "Mr. Percival can have no objection to answering a simple inquiry—whether he and Mr. Carresford were on good terms?"

"On the best of terms," Ray answered promptly.

"Always?"

"Always."

"There had been no hot words—no difference between you?"

"None."

"It is my duty to caution you, Mr. Percival," the inspector interposed, "that any statement you may make is liable to be used against you."

"You are welcome to report every word I say," Ray answered, drawing up his head with that haughty gesture which came so naturally to him. "Have you any other questions to ask? I am ready to answer."

Mrs. Percival, in the background, had heard what was going on, and now she came forward, pale with anxiety, alarm, indignation, and stood up by his side. The others glanced at her and at each other.

"We need not trouble Mr. Percival any further at present," said the inspector. "I will take charge of this," and he put the phial in his pocket.

"The chemist must have made a mistake and given you an empty bottle," said Mrs. Percival, looking at Ray with loving faith.

"Allow me to look at the bottle," said Dr. Fosse to the inspector. "You see it has been opened, and corked up again so as to look as if it had *not*," he observed. Then removing the cork he smelt the phial carefully before he added: "It has contained hydrocyanic acid."

"Might it not have evaporated?" asked Mrs. Percival.

The doctor shook his head; and in a minute or two, with a general observation that there were no further inquiries to be made there at present, the party of inquirers drifted away, most of them very silent till they got out of the Percivals' sight.

"My darling, it is too bad that you should be worried about this," Mrs. Percival said tenderly, but not too anxiously; she saw it was the kindest thing to do to try and lessen the importance and danger of the discovery of the empty phial.

"I shall be lucky if I am not worse worried," Ray rejoined

with a dark look of gloom. "How came it empty? The chemist *must* have made some blunder or corked it badly. Could it have leaked out in my pocket?"

"Which coat? which pocket was it? Let us look at once," she suggested eagerly. They did so, but there was not the slightest sign of any liquid having leaked in the pocket where he had carried the phial.

Ray presently went downstairs to look at the time-tables and see by what train Gertrude and Rhoda might be expected. Was it his fancy that the people he met looked at him curiously—strangely? Few spoke to him, but all looked at him. One of those who spoke to him was Dr. Treherne, who beckoned him aside into the reading-room.

"I am going to say a word to you which perhaps it is not my duty to say, but I say it for your mother's sake. Mrs. Percival is a lady we all here have learned to esteem. For her sake, as well as for your own, let me advise you, if you know anything at all about this sad business, *tell it*. Of course I can have no idea what reasons you may possibly have for reticence, but in your own interests it will be better for you in the end to make a clean breast of it now."

"Thanks for the advice you evidently mean kindly," Ray replied, "but as I know nothing, I can tell nothing. That empty phial is as much a mystery to me as it is to you."

"Well, I have no desire to pursue the subject; I have said my say," observed Dr. Treherne; and it occurred to Ray that the doctor's air was of morally washing his hands of him and leaving him to go his own way. He passed on into the back parlour, and there his attention was attracted by voices on the other side of the tapestry *portière* which separated this room from the larger central drawing-room.

"But what motive could there be for his desiring it?" said one voice.

"Motive! motive enough!" replied another. "The poor fellow was on the eve of marriage—the birth of a child of his would cut this young man out of the property—Carresford dying unmarried and childless leaves him heir to all. And by what I hear the young fellow's rather a scapegrace, idle and extravagant. There must have been some ill-blood between them, too, for poor Carresford was heard to tell him that he was a disgrace and a scandal to the family."

Ray's hot blood flamed up to his very brow. With one quick, impulsive movement, he swept the *portière* aside and stepped into the adjoining room and faced the speakers. He was almost trembling with indignation, but he forcibly controlled himself to speak with perfect composure and steadiness of tone.

"Pardon me, but were the words I have just overheard meant to refer to *me*?"

The two gentlemen looked at each other aghast; then the last speaker said:

"Really, Mr. Percival, I must ask—I do not know—what it was that you overheard?"

"Your last few words. I heard them by accident. I felt bound to interrupt you, and tell you that you have been misinformed. There was *no* ill-blood between us, never; and Mr. Carresford never spoke such words to me as those you have heard falsely attributed to him."

The other paused a moment, and then replied somewhat stiffly:

"If I have been misled, Mr. Percival, it is, I suppose, for me to apologize for having repeated insufficiently authenticated reports."

"What was your authority for them?"

"You must excuse me for declining to give it. It was, perhaps, mere idle rumour, to which I should have done better not to have attached sufficient importance to repeat it."

"Another time it *would* be better if you were to think twice before repeating and giving currency to such idle 'rumours' which blast a man's character and might wreck his life!" rejoined Ray, still compelling himself to calmness of voice and attitude, but his eyes flashing like dark flames.

"We both, I am sure, exceedingly regret the accident which brought you within hearing of words spoken in thoughtlessness, not dreaming you were near," said the second speaker, quite smoothly and politely, and with no unnecessary significance pointing the innuendo as to the nature of the accident.

"I have no doubt," said Ray shortly. "For my part I am glad that I have heard them. They have enlightened me," he added bitterly.

They had indeed, and the light which they threw on his position was like a ghastly and lurid light leaping up from a yawning chasm of fire wherein lost souls writhed. What horrible gulf seemed to yawn before him? In what disastrous mystery was he helplessly and incomprehensibly involved? He sat for some time dead silent, his hands clasping his head, in which horrible thoughts seemed to dart and sting like fiery snakes—in the room where the two men had left him alone, for he had determined he would not be the first to leave—the one to turn and retreat. So he stayed, a prey to maddening thoughts. Ill-blood between him and Geoffrey! Geoff—the dearest, best, truest—! The tears forced themselves into his eyes as he thought of Geoffrey lying dead, by murder or by strange mishap! The theory of suicide he knew Geoffrey well enough to regard as an impossible alternative to accept. And people—human creatures—his fellow men! were attributing to him motives—motives most base and sordid—for desiring Geoffrey's death, when he would have risked his own life to save him. Who could have set such an idea afloat? It must have been some servants' gossip. Or Bartram? Bartram had never

liked him, he knew. Bartram would be ready to place the worst interpretation on anything he ever said, did, looked, or thought. That was true enough, but he did not suspect a yet more dangerous, because far more subtle and insidious, influence against him than Alfred Bartram's. Dr. Fitzallan's serious looks and expressive silences were more harmful to him by far than Mr. Bartram's petty prejudice. He felt he could not face his mother yet, with anguish in his mind which he feared he could not conceal from her tender scrutiny, yet which he would not pain her by revealing. He went out for a walk; and as he went and as he returned he was sure that he caught glimpses of policemen on the watch.

He went up to his own room; and there presently his mother came to him, and he saw at once that she was deeply moved and trying to repress her agitation.

"My darling boy," she said, endeavouring to speak easily, "I hate to trouble you——"

"You will not trouble me, dear. What is it?"

"May," she replied, with a mingling of hesitation and impetuosity, "May wants to see you—I am afraid nothing will quiet her but seeing you—and yet I don't want to let you be—worried! Poor girl, we must be patient with her; she is hysterical, and feverish and upset. But I can't have patience to stay with her," she added with a flash of passion, "and I won't have *you* troubled, my Ray, if you do not wish to see her. She—she—the poor girl is very much excited; those doctors have been in to see her, and some foolish meddling busybodies have been paying her visits of condolence—and—and you must not mind any wild nonsense she may talk."

"If May has asked for me, mother, of course I must see her," he said. "It is not likely I could take offence at anything that poor May *could* say to-day!"

"She is in the sitting-room, darling, if you would like to go to her now."

So he went in to see the bereaved bride-elect, in whom he could hardly have recognized the bright, coquettish, spoilt and petted beauty of yesterday. This wan, trembling, haggard creature, with disordered hair and careless dress, was a transformation from the dainty Lady May. Asenath was seated beside her on the sofa, soothing and supporting her. As Ray came towards her, May started up excitedly from Asenath's arms; she seemed in a fever, her cheeks crimsoned in one spot with a hectic flush, her eyes, wet and swollen with tears, yet dilated and flashing.

"Come here, Ray!" she exclaimed breathlessly, trembling as she raised herself up. "What is this horrible mystery? The poison you bought, how came it in Geoffrey's room? What do you know of this dreadful thing? Explain it to me! Explain it!" she panted with imperious passion.

"If you think I *can* explain—that I know anything of it—

you accuse me of—May, do you know what your words seem to convey?"

"I don't accuse you of anything," she cried. "I won't believe what they say, if you will only explain. Tell me—tell *me* who have a right to ask—what you know or what you suspect! But what can I think, if you *won't* tell me *how* you are mixed up in this?"

"Mixed up!" he repeated, his chest heaving and his breath coming short. "If I were in any way mixed up in it, if I had any hand in, or knowledge or suspicion of the cause of Geoffrey's death, would you take the word—the oath—of such a double-dyed scoundrel as I should be?" He glanced at Asenath with an unconscious, passionate appeal in his look; but she was silent.

It was for May to speak—May, Geoffrey's betrothed, not for Ray's friend to interfere.

"I don't want to think ill of you, Ray," said May agitatedly; "but what did you do with the poison you bought, the poison that killed him? I want to give you the chance of clearing yourself. Tell me *how* came that bottle empty?"

"God knows—I think the devil knows best! Can you realize, May," he broke out, almost choking with emotion; "*what* your words imply? You—you seem to suspect—to accuse me—of *what*—? Of no common crime, of murder and treachery blacker than hell; the fiends themselves would shrink from so base a villain as I—if I were—what you seem to suspect!"

May burst into tears.

"What am I to think?" she sobbed wildly. "Oh, what *am* I to think?"

His indignant passion gave way to pity, as he heard her heart-breaking sobs.

"You *cannot* think, May," he said earnestly, but subduing with an effort the vehemence of his tone, "that I would either have hurt one hair of Geoffrey's head myself, or have known or suspected that any living creature designed harm to him, and stood by and kept such a suspicion secret? You cannot think that I am cognizant of anything that could clear up this horrible mystery—more horrible to me than even to *you*!" he added with sombre bitterness.

May wrung her hands and writhed as if in physical pain. "Oh, oh!" she moaned, "if you cannot throw a light upon it, who can? What can I think? The poison, *you* bought it. You will not tell me he took it himself? I would not believe it, never! Oh, Geoffrey—oh, Geoffrey! tell me what to think." She broke down into such a paroxysm of hysterical sobbing that Ray was fairly alarmed; but Asenath gently and quietly took her in her arms.

"Come, dear," she said soothingly, "this is too much for you; come into your room and lie down. You are not strong enough yet to keep up and to bear this—you must lie down. Come, let me get you to your room."

May submitted. Still shaken by convulsive sobs, and exhausted with agitation, she clung to Asenath—leaning all her fragile weight on her for support—and allowed Asenath to lead her to her room.

There Mrs. Percival, her heart relenting at the sound of May's pitiful weeping, soon came to her; and there Asenath hastened to make the first excuse she could to leave them together, and returned to the sitting-room where she had left Ray, her heart beating with anxiety as she wondered whether she should still find him there.

Yes, he had not left the room. He had thrown himself into a chair; his arms were flung out and crossed on the table, his head cast down upon them, his face hidden.

At the sight of his bowed head, his crushed and despairing attitude, a thrill of passionate sympathy, tenderness, indignation that any one should suspect *him* of complicity in crime, cut like a knife into Asenath's heart. She had often enough seen Ray angry, hurt, indignant, grieved, repentant; but never yet had she, or any one, seen his head cast down in that abandonment of distress. She went quietly towards him, and laid her hand, as softly as a falling snowflake, upon his shoulder. He looked up.

"Have you too come to ask me," he said with suppressed passion, "if I am a devil incarnate, for whom hanging would be a hundred-fold too good?"

"No, no. Only to say—what surely needs no saying—that no one who knows you could possibly attach one moment's importance to this most monstrous—absurd idea of *your* having any knowledge of this dreadful affair."

"God bless you, my angel!" he exclaimed, with a sudden reaction of feeling that dimmed the flash of his eyes and broke his voice. "Then *you* do not suspect me?"

"Suspect you? No—never! This will all be cleared up; it is only just now it looks mysterious," she said soothingly. "When full inquiries come to be made, the truth—whatever it may be—will be brought out. Poor Lady May is over-wrought and talks wildly; you must not think too much of what she says; she does not really mean half of it. Don't fret yourself about it, Ray."

"It is *too* horrible," he said, looking into her gentle, serious, sympathetic eyes, "that any human creature should suspect me of complicity in Geoffrey's death—my own flesh and blood—my best and dearest friend! I feel as if I were in a dreadful nightmare. And it is now, when my whole soul is bruised and sore and crushed under this monstrous suspicion, that you come to give me comfort. It is like you, my good angel!" and he clasped her hand gratefully.

"Do not call me that," she rejoined in a low and unsteady voice. "I have not been good—to *you*. I have been only trouble to you. I have caused you nothing but pain!"

"And have I not caused you trouble too? And have you not

forgiven me, dearest and best? Yes, let me say it; for you *are* 'dearest and best' to me, though I know I may never say 'my love!'"

"No—never—never! Try not to even *think* it," she said, shrinking and drawing back with a pale, pained look.

"Don't go just yet," he entreated. "Wait; I have something to say to you. Those fellows—O'Brien and Digby—it is all right about *them*. Lunch is long over; they have come and gone, and have seen none of *us*; none of us have been to the dining-room to-day; so that is all right! And one more thing. Look here, I was *not* with you on the balcony last night. I did *not* leave you there and pass through Geoffrey's room. I was never there nor near there at that time!"

"Is this for my sake? I will not have it, Ray! What *must* you think of me?" she said, with a subdued flash of reproach that was without any least touch of anger now.

"I think you all that is best, purest and truest in womankind. It is for my own sake. I have denied it—said I was not there, and my denial must not be disproved!"

"You have denied it? You *shall not* compromise yourself for me!"

"It is not for you, dearest. Don't—don't shrink so; don't be angry with me for calling you what you *are*! No, do not leave me yet. I feel as if dark days were coming upon me, and your mere presence gives me hope and comfort and strength! Tell me once more that you will never doubt me—never suspect me of such hideous guilt as *this*!"

"I know you too well to doubt you," she said steadfastly. "Nothing upon earth should ever make me suspect you of any guilty knowledge in this matter! Nothing and no one shall ever shake my faith!"

"Heaven's blessing on you, my darling, for the blessing those dear words are to me."

They had been close together, speaking in low, subdued voices. Neither of them could ever have told how it was that they drew nearer—nearer—till he could almost hear the beating of her heart, until their lips met in one first and last forbidden kiss—the first, save indeed for that one brief caress of which Ray was for ever ashamed, the robbery of that one mad moment, of which he loathed the memory, in which he had degraded himself in her eyes and in his own. Now his lips touched hers gently, reverently, with a depth of emotion in which passion melted and was lost in an unutterable yearning tenderness. And she—her yielding to his kiss for this one moment now was an unspoken protest of her trust—a vow of confidence—less a caress of love than a seal of undying faith! It was only for one moment; then she shrank away from him.

"Let me go, Ray; let me go!" she murmured, with an absolute

terror and entreaty in her tone that made him instantly release her.

"I would not detain you one moment against your will. But don't leave me in anger, dear!" he said gently.

"I am not angry with you," she answered in a low trembling voice, "only with myself—never with *you* again!"

She clasped her hands before her face to hide it from his eyes. Her proud head drooped with a humiliation she had never known before. Still screening her face, as if in utter shame, with one hand, she reached the other, with a blind uncertain gesture, towards the door, and hurriedly moved away, and left him, her face downcast and abashed, yet pale, not blushing.

She did not know then how true were the words she had just uttered on impulse—did not know that she never *would* be angry with Ray Percival again! But she knew she had lost the right to blame him.

If he had sinned in loving her, what right had she to reproach him *now*—now that she recognized the feeling in the depths of her own heart for what it was! Saw it unveiled at last in its true colours, and knew it by its rightful name! She shrank with shuddering dismay as Love rose up in its power and might, and the voice whose faint low whispers she had refused to recognize before, now swelled and filled her soul.

"You are mine!" it said, and she knew the voice—to her the terrible voice of Love. "Proud of your stainless fair fame, which no woman's whisper has ventured to tarnish—confident in the unsullied snow of your icy purity, which no man has dared hope to melt—you are mine at last! You may keep the secret till you die of it, even from him who has delivered you into my power! You may hide it from him and from all the world, but till the day you die, though no eye sees it but your own, my brand is on your breast, my seal upon your brow!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"MURDER MOST FOUL, AS AT THE BEST IT IS!"

"O, Evil was the root, and bitter was the fruit,
And crimson was the juice of the vintage that we trod!"

THE inquest was held the next day at Hygeia Hall. Mrs. Percival and Ray were present, of course, and Gertrude Carresford, who had arrived from London with Rhoda. Lady May was, naturally, not equal to the ordeal of being present at the official inquiry into the cause of her lover's death; Kate Dundas also was utterly unnerved; Eileen was always delicate, and Mrs. Percival thought it much best for Rhoda to remain with them. The case created the greatest excitement in the hotel and neighbourhood; and every one who on any pretext could get into the inquest room was there.

Asenath wished to be present; but her husband had reasons of his own for refusing to allow it.

James Robbins, the night porter, gave evidence that about three o'clock in the morning he had opened the hall door for Mr. Carresford, who had returned by the late train. Robbins had accompanied him up to his room and gone on his round. A short time afterwards, on his return round along the corridor, he had seen Mr. Carresford dash open his door and stagger out clinging to the door post. Thinking his manner strange, had hurried to him in time to catch him as he fell. Seeing "death in his face," he had called up Dr. Treherne. Before that, Mr. Percival had come out of his room; then Mrs. Percival came, and then the other ladies. It was also elicited from this witness that Mr. Percival had come before Robbins called for help, and that he alone of all the startled household was fully dressed, the others having all run out in more or less *déshabille*.

The next witness called was "John Raymond Percival," and that unmistakable flutter known as a "sensation" ran through the audience as Ray stepped forward. Some of those who had not seen him before made their mental note of him as "a fine, handsome fellow, but with rather a hard, defiant, stubborn sort of look," the fact being that deep feeling, resolutely controlled, always gave that almost stern look to Ray's naturally mobile and expressive face. Having enlightened the jury as to his precise degree of kindred with the deceased, he gave his account of Geoffrey's death, not without a little suspicious inequality in his voice as he related how he had only reached his side in time to witness his last moments and receive his last breath. He then answered a series of close questions that were put to him. No, he was not in bed at the time of the alarm; he was still up and dressed. Why was he not in bed? Because he was wakeful. Any reason for his wakefulness? None. Had he been into Mr. Carresford's room that night? No. Had he been out on the balcony after retiring to rest? No. He freely admitted the purchase of the poison, and the finding of the empty phial; gave his reason for the purchase, to put his dog out of pain; could not account for the phial being empty, unless the chemist had given him an empty one by mistake. Had always been on good terms with the deceased; had had no quarrel with him. Yes, it was true that he was, by the terms of his grandfather's will, next heir to the property in the event—which had come to pass—of his uncle's dying without offspring. Admitted that he, Ray, had lately had some money difficulties, and was not yet quite free from debts; but wished to be allowed to observe that these were his personal and private affairs.

Mrs. Percival followed with her account of the night alarm; corroborated Ray's evidence in every particular that came within her knowledge; and emphasized the fact that her brother and her

son were, and had always been, on the closest terms of affection and good comradeship.

Then came Dr. Treherne, who deposed that the cause of death was beyond question poisoning by hydrocyanic acid; described post-mortem appearances, stated that traces of the poison were discovered in the glass and also in the bottle from which the fatal dose had been poured. This bottle was one of Messrs. Bryce and Taylor's phials, exactly resembling the bottle containing the medicine he, Dr. Treherne, had prescribed. The latter bottle had been found intact at the back of the dressing-table, having rolled, or been placed, under the looking-glass. Evidently the bottle containing the poisoned dose had been substituted for that containing the draught. Dr. Fosse corroborated his colleague's statement as to the cause of death and the traces of poison.

Next the chemist, Mr. Bryce, and his assistant deposed to the preparation of Dr. Treherne's prescription for Mr. Carresford and the sale of the poison to Mr. Percival; identified the phial now empty, but sold to him full, and the two larger phials, exactly similar, only that the one still contained the untouched medicine, the other, empty now, had contained the poisoned dose. The hydrocyanic acid had not been administered exactly as it was sold; a little medicated syrup had been added to it, which would help to disguise the flavour and make it taste more like the medicine for which it had been substituted.

Then Inspector Evans made his statement; and next "Sarah Spotts" was called, and the chambermaid gave her evidence as to the finding of the bottles in Mr. Carresford's room, the poison on the table by the bed where his nightly draught usually stood, and the draught under the looking-glass.

All this evidence, so clearly pointing to deliberately planned murder, was followed with breathless interest, which was even deepened when Sarah Spotts went on to state that she had seen Mr. Percival come out of Mr. Carresford's room, during the latter's absence the evening before his death. She and Jane Cole had been in the linen closet at the head of the stairs; seeing Mr. Carresford's door open "softly like" and knowing he was out, they had looked to see who was the person leaving his room, and they could both swear to Mr. Percival.

Jane Cole corroborated this evidence.

Next, Mrs. Blackstone, who occupied a room on the same side of the corridor as Ray's, stated that about half-past one o'clock in the morning, as nearly as she could guess, she had heard a sound like a window very quietly opening and a soft and stealthy step along the balcony. It was very low, and she asked her husband if he heard it, but he was asleep and had heard nothing. She was sure she had not been dreaming; she had been wide awake with neuralgia. In a little while she had heard the same quiet step returning; Mr. Blackstone, by that time awake, heard it too; and

now came forward to state as much. A juryman inquired the arrangement of the rooms on that corridor, and a plan was exhibited, showing that the Blackstones' room, between Mrs. Percival's and the passage, was, of course, so situated that any one going from Ray's room to Geoffrey's, or *vice versa*, must pass it.

Then Dr. Fitzallan stepped forward. His evidence was to the effect that about half-past one or a quarter to two o'clock he had been looking out of his window; his room was in the pavilion opposite the balcony on which all the rooms of Mr. Carresford's party gave, and he had seen a shadowy figure pass along the balcony to the window of Mr. Carresford's room, which was half open, and enter it. So far his statement was literally and accurately true. Then came the question—Could he identify the figure? No, he had only seen it as a shadowy form passing in the dusk behind the glass. Was it man or woman? The witness did not hesitate, but answered firmly, *Man!* Tall or short? Tall. About how tall? Well—a tall man—about—well, he should say about Mr. Carresford's own height, but could not be positive to half an inch. A juryman suggested that Mr. Percival should stand up. Ray did so, steadily drawing himself up to his full height, his face pale and set. Would Dr. Fitzallan look at Mr. Percival and say, Was the figure about that height? Well, about, as near as he could judge. Could he give no particulars as to dress, features, or any other details? He could see but dimly through the glass. If it had not been bright moonlight he could hardly have seen at all. It was a dark figure, a man; a tall man; that was all he could swear. And the general impression was that Dr. Fitzallan was kindly endeavouring to avoid compromising Mr. Percival any more than he was compelled in conscientious duty to do, and was anxious to give him all possible benefit of the doubt.

But the picture dwelt in the minds of the jury—of the midnight murderer stealing to his intended victim's room in the silence and darkness—either to assure himself that the poison he had placed there before was in the right place, or else, perhaps, having failed in his nefarious scheme of exchanging the bottles earlier in the night, to carry it out now.

But one more witness was now to be called—John Woollett, who stated that the night before Mr. Carresford went away he had been passing the smoking-room door, which was not quite closed, and had heard Mr. Carresford and Mr. Percival talking excitedly—like as if they were having high words—and Mr. Carresford called Mr. Percival a disgrace and a scandal to the family.

As this witness retired, Ray rose again, a wave of colour surging up in his pale cheek, as he asked permission to say a few words.

"I wish to state," he said, "that the last witness is entirely mistaken. There were no 'high words' between Mr. Carresford and myself; there was no quarrel, nor cause for quarrel, between us; and he did *not* call me a disgrace and scandal to our family."

"Were the words 'disgrace' and 'scandal' used?"

"No—at least, they may have been uttered—merely used in a general sense——"

"What was the subject of your conversation?"

"A general sort of conversation."

"Can you not remember what it was in the course of this 'general' conversation that led Mr. Carresford to speak of disgrace and scandal?"

"I cannot—unless it was a—in a kind of general allusion to—to the dangers one has to avoid in life."

"Was not Mr. Carresford, in these 'general' allusions, warning you of the disgraceful and scandalous consequences attending some particular course of conduct?"

The flush deepened on Ray's face as he answered curtly, "No."

The jury looked at each other, and one spoke to the foreman; the foreman leaned forward and said something to the coroner.

"You have heard the evidence of the witnesses who have sworn to your presence in Mr. Carresford's room?" was the next question.

"I have heard allusions to a shadow and a footstep," was the reply.

"Do you still deny having been into that room on that night?"

"I do."

"Do you deny that the two chambermaids saw you come out of that room?"

Ray was silent a moment, feeling himself "between the devil and the deep sea." To persist in a lie, always distasteful and painful to him, was now, as he could too clearly see, dangerous; the slightest misstatement discrediting his veracity added to the risks of a position he already saw was perilous. It was hateful to adhere to the falsehood he had rashly uttered, not for his own sake; but, on the other hand, how far more hateful, how *impossible*, to admit that he had entered Geoffrey's room by the window and left it by the door—to be cross-questioned about his motive in passing through that dark room instead of along the open passage—in all probability to have Asenath's name dragged in against his will, for though *he* would not breathe that name to save his life, it was likely that if the exact time were mentioned, and any allusion to the balcony made, Dr. Fitzallan, who had been there, would suspect, or Asenath herself, if she dreamt that his silence was a sacrifice for *her* sake, might for *his*, disclose the truth and reveal his reason for denying it. No! he could not run the risk of compromising her; he could not now retract that first false statement to which he had rashly committed himself; and he again repeated his denial.

The evidence was over; the coroner clearly and succinctly summed it up. Ray could realize how terribly it all told against him. He felt himself powerless, helplessly entangled in the

meshes of a net that was drawing closer—closer round him! His own struggles and efforts could not release him from it! To what fate would it drag him in its stifling web? He saw his mother's face growing whiter and whiter, with the vague terror at which she dared not look closely enough to realize its true form. The jury considered for a few minutes, but only for a few. Ray was scarcely surprised, and yet a bolt of ice seemed to run through his heart when he heard the verdict—and the formless horror was put at once into plain words and publicly announced, "for all the world to see!" All the world indeed would know in a few hours that the finding of the jury was "Wilful murder, against John Raymond Percival!"

His mother gasped and caught his hand.

"Keep cool, dear—don't give way!" he whispered pressing hers tenderly.

The coroner beckoned to the inspector of police, spoke a few words aside, and drew pen and paper towards him.

A little incident occurred now which went further in some people's minds to incline them towards a belief in Ray's innocence than his own evidence and manner—truthful though they had been except on one fatally weak point—had done. As he rose and stepped forward, in readiness to surrender himself into custody, his mother rising too, and a general stir and buzz running through the crowded room, Gertrude Carresford came quickly up to him and took his hand—then, as if that were not enough—slipped both her hands through his arm and clasped them there, and stood up by his side. There could not have been a more expressive and silently eloquent declaration of faith and confidence on the part of the murdered man's sister; and those who were nearest heard her say, in a soothing, trustful tone:

"*Dear Ray*, don't mind too much; this absurd, monstrous charge can never stand!"

Every one present who did not know who was that fair-haired, sweet-laced lady in black, knew within the next five minutes; and her action was not without some effect. Mrs. Percival's belief did not count for much, as, although Geoffrey Carresford's sister, she was Ray's mother; and the mother would naturally be stronger in her than the sister; but here was Miss Carresford, the aunt—and what a young aunt for him she was!—unmistakably testifying her faith in Ray Percival too.

Ray bore himself coolly and firmly, though he was marble-pale; and as he passed down the long room in custody, two police-officers by his side, he had never held his head higher nor walked with steadier step. Permission was given him to return to his rooms for a few minutes, and to take leave of his family. Kate went off into a fit of hysterical sobbing directly she heard the bad news; the rest clung round him and tried not to cry, and endeavoured to keep up an air of sanguine assurance that it would soon

be cleared up and they would have him back with them again; only Rhoda, as she threw her arms round her brother's neck, was unable to restrain her tears of indignation and terror, and Eileen, with unusual demonstration, clung to him and kissed him tenderly, speechless with emotion, for she had loved Geoffrey far too dearly not to *know* who loved him too. Asenath was there also, endeavouring to soothe the poor Kate; and Mrs. Percival inquired of her eagerly, in reference to Dr. Fitzallan's evidence:

"Were *you* awake and looking out of the window too? Did *you* see anything of this mysterious shadow on the balcony? If we could only clear up *that* point!"

But Asenath had been asleep, and seen and heard nothing.

Ray seized the opportunity of following her as she was taking Kate to her room, and whispering urgently, as he caught her at the door for one moment, "Remember what I said yesterday. *I* have *denied* it! Not a word, for both our sakes—*never*! Then you saw nothing?" he added, in a louder tone, as if his first words had also referred to the shadowy figure on the balcony.

"Nothing. I did not even know my husband had seen anything."

"Good-bye," he said, and pressed the hand that for once returned the pressure; the two hands quivered and clung together closer and closer, as if they could never part, and to Ray it seemed more like tearing his heart out than only letting go of her hand, not knowing when he should clasp it again.

He had one saddest farewell of all to make now. His other dear ones he might see again; but Geoffrey's face would be hidden under the coffin-lid before he could hope to be released. His mother only went with him into Geoffrey's room; and he looked his last upon the dead face, which lay cold and rigid in that mysterious and awful quiescence—the face, so seldom harsh or stern in life, which had never failed to greet him with a genial smile, now fixed and frozen in the relentless calm of that impenetrable repose.

Never again would he find a friend like this dear comrade and kinsman, whom he had held in close and brotherly love, whose death he stood charged with compassing by the most cold-blooded and inhuman of all "foul and unnatural murders." The police were waiting outside the door for him even while he took his last farewell of the victim he was supposed to have treacherously destroyed.

The tragic loss of this beloved comrade, the horror of finding himself accused of his murder, now, as he looked down on the sealed eyes and stony lips that could not bear witness, shook the steady self-control and composure with which he had borne himself before strangers' eyes. A sob climbed in his throat, and his eyes were dim as he stooped and pressed his lips upon the icy forehead.

"Good-bye, dear old fellow!" he said in a choking voice. "If you could only speak!"

But the secret they might have told—if indeed beyond the darkness of death, the freed soul saw “with cleared eyes!”—lay locked within those rigid lips. The sister who had loved him bent over him and kissed him too.

“Geoffrey, dearest,” she whispered, “if ever you loved us, send some sign, some clue, to clear our Ray.”

She turned to her son and took him in her arms, with an unutterable passion of tenderness, still and solemn as befitted the presence in which they stood.

“My Ray—my own!” she murmured, “if there is a Heaven from which he can look down, Geoffrey will send some light on this dark mystery, and give you back to us soon!”

(*To be continued.*)

AD MATREM.

THE Years march slow, with lagging feet,
They keep in step with Time;
So slow, that we cannot forget
The gladness of our prime.

Thank God, then, for the swift winged Hours,
Which nestle at our heart,
And keep us young, despite ourselves,
And help us play our part.

For when the stately Years look down,
Telling of all gone by,
The little Hours, warm at our heart,
Can give them back the lie!

The heart, they say, which shelters us,
So true, so warm, appears,
That Time must take his count from us,
Instead of from the Years.

AUTHOR OF “MISS MOLLY.”

A WOMAN'S HEART

By MRS. ALEXANDER,

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"A FALSE SCENT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER IV.

A PAIR OF FRIENDS.

GENERAL GRANARD had never enjoyed his comfortable quarters more thoroughly than after beating off the last enemy in Paris. His strength was returning slowly, but surely; and the slight weakness which still lingered in his limbs made his remarkably easy chairs seem absolutely luxurious. He was much too prudent to face the draughts and dangers of a visit to his club; but then the club visited him, that is to say, all of his acquaintances who were in town in the dreary month of November made a point of calling on the popular veteran, especially the ladies, and the gallant general was particularly fond of their society.

His acquaintances were of nearly every class, and included professional and commercial men, the latter as a species of outlying detachment with whom he kept up communications through their well-dressed sympathetic wives.

This branch of his society was very much in town, even in the "out of season" period: and the general delighted in offering tea, with the most delicate bread and butter, both brown and white, muffins fine and crisp, to say nothing of sundry cakes, to his various visitors. Indeed there was scarcely an afternoon on which the general's fair following did not rally round the tea-pot, which had replaced his standard of former days.

Over this cheerful entertainment the ex-Corporal Stubbs presided grimly, imparting a *piquante* though subdued camp flavour to the whole by his rugged and soldierly aspect.

A little after four the general usually made his toilette, replacing his comfortable and becoming *robe de chambre* by a well-fitting frock-coat, and brushing his fine abundant grey hair into review order.

"I really think, Stubbs," he said one chill and drizzling afternoon some weeks after his return, "it is hardly worth my while to dress. I don't fancy I shall have any visitors this miserable afternoon."

"Well, it do look bad, sir," returned Stubbs, pausing as he marshalled the cups and saucers—being in the act of preparing the tea-table. "Still, it's always best to be prepared for the enemy; and the ladies are pretty reg'lar, sir."

"The enemy! you ungallant dog!" cried the general laughing. "Perhaps you are right; but this weather makes me lazy, and—by George! there's the bell."

"So it is, sir, and uncommon early. Maybe they have thrown out skirmishers this time."

He left the room, but returned soon, with something like a subdued grin.

"It's Miss Sandys, sir," he said.

"The devil!" escaped General Granard's lips in an undertone, but he added resignedly, "show her in."

The next moment a small figure, covered from head to foot in a dripping rain cloak and crowned by a serviceable brown felt hat, presented itself.

"My dear child! before I can have the pleasure of shaking hands with you, you must remove that cloak. I dare not risk——"

"Oh! yes, certainly," interrupted the young lady, retreating in nervous haste. "It is too careless of me," and Stubbs the unbending followed to assist her.

"I am sure Lady de Walden would never forgive me if I gave you cold," she said, returning in another moment. "I don't think I am dangerous now."

"No doubt," shaking hands with her. "Come, draw near the fire, and tell me what has brought you to London. Stubbs, get Miss Sandys a cup of tea at once; she is white with cold. Now, my dear."

"It is rather a long story, general. You know Mrs. Stepney?"

"I have not that honour," drily.

"Well, you know who I mean? The artist I have been living with."

"Yes; I am aware of that fact. Has she turned you out?"

"No, indeed she has not; but the dreadful man she hired our little studio from turned us out."

"I hope you were not objectionable tenants?"

"We were excellent tenants, General Granard, but he wanted more rent. Then, when we were so frightfully upset, a friend of Mrs. Stepney's, also an artist—a very clever artist—who had a studio and took pupils, wrote to say she was going to marry, and offered her studio at a lower rent than we had paid and a chance of some of the pupils; so Mrs. Stepney agreed—and we packed up directly."

"Ah! hum! I suppose you are not bound for ever to this energetic—lady?"

"No; she might dissolve partnership any day, which would be bad for me."

"I don't think so, Lillian. Here is your tea—put the little table beside Miss Sandys, Stubbs; it will be more comfortable. You know I am an old-fashioned fellow, my dear young lady, with a soldier's chivalrous feeling towards your charming sex, and although I have no right whatever to interfere with *you*—in short, we have no claims on each other—I should be glad to see you sheltered in the bosom of some quiet, respectable family—the natural abode for a delicate girl—instead of knowing you are buffeting about in the vulgar struggle for existence."

"I am sure it is very nice and kind of you to say so," returned Lilly softly and with a certain shy hesitancy; "but, you see, if I did *not* struggle I couldn't exist; and I am afraid no very respectable family would take me for fifty pounds a year—and that would only leave me twenty-five for everything."

"I do not pretend to go into details," said the general loftily. "Still, you might make yourself useful with children or household matters, and so eke out——"

"I hate children," said Lilly more gently than before.

"A very unwomanly sentiment."

"Yes; I know it is." She filled herself another cup as she spoke. "Now, with Mrs. Stepney, we share exactly what our food costs, and I pay for my bedroom. Then I can do nothing but draw or paint. They never could teach me anything at school—not even to spell—and I don't care to read. What is the use of trying to do what you are not intended to do? and to learn a lot of things that you don't care about and can do you no good? I don't care for William the Conqueror, and the Danes, and those tiresome Romans—it's nothing to me their fightings and murderings; but I can stand at my easel for eight hours, and though my legs ache, my heart is never weary. Then I get some money by sketching fashions. I sold two flower studies for three pounds each, besides a bit of the forest at Fontainebleau for two ten. I shall get on by degrees. Mrs. Stepney *is* kind and I can help her too. We quarrel now and then, but we are true chums for all that, and people don't generally care about me."

"Well, Lillian, you must go your own way; I am in no way responsible for your conduct."

"Of course not, and I was not sure whether I should trouble you with a visit; but you have been good to me, too, and I thought I should like to see you, and hear about Lady de Walden. Oh, how I wish she would sit to me. I love to look at her. I think I could paint her."

"I sincerely wish you had a good husband, Lillian."

"Well, yes," thoughtfully, "so do I; but, after all, I am dreadfully afraid I should get tired of him and want another."

"I fear, Lillian, you have been corrupted by the Bohemian and rather disreputable set you have been amongst."

"I suppose so," reflectively; putting aside her tea cup and turn-

ing to the fire she clasped her hands together round her knees and sat staring at it; "they are all quite different from you, you look so nice and clean, and brushed and set up and buckled in. I should like to paint you too," and she looked earnestly at him with her soft, dark brown expressive eyes, in which a gleam of merriment lurked. "But I should not care to *live* with a lot of people like you; your kind seem so neat, as if enamelled on gold. Now I love the rough surface of solid paint. I don't wonder you don't like me."

"That is putting it too strongly. I am always interested in my old comrade's daughter, my own god-child."

"Thank you. I am not going to trouble you much."

"I am sure you never have. And now I must apologize for receiving you in this *deshabille*."

"You are beautiful," observed Lilly, scrutinizing him frankly.

"This garment is ever so much better than a coat."

"Nevertheless, I must put one on," returned the general laughing and flattered, "if you will excuse me—for I expect visitors."

"Then I shall go."

"Pray do not be in a hurry," politely.

"I am not fit to be seen, and I can't bear to be shabby."

"Where are you staying?"

"We have lodgings in Pinkerton Place, Brompton Road, but they are uncomfortable and too far from the studio, so we must find others; but here is the address for the present"—she laid an envelope on the table. "The studio is not far from this; it's in a sort of stable lane, but it has a good light."

The general groaned.

"Is Lady de Walden at home, and is there any chance of her coming to town?"

"She is at Beaumont Royal, but will not come up before Christmas."

"That seems a long way off. I shall write to her."

"She will, I am sure, be very pleased."

"Now I really must go."

"Good-bye, then."

"Perhaps when we are settled you will come and see our studio," returned Lill.

"I shall be most happy; and here, Lillian"—feeling in his pocket he handed her some coin of the realm—"accept this trifle from me—just for cab hire, you know," trying to put a half-sovereign in her hand.

"Thank you very much," drawing back, her pale cheek flushing; "but indeed I do not want it. I would rather not, thank you. No, General Granard; I will not."

"Well, my dear, as you like. I admire an independent spirit—but from an old friend!"

"No matter! I think I shall make enough for all I want, though it is in an unwomanly fashion."

"The door, Stubbs. Well, if you will go, good-bye; my best wishes." The general bowed elegantly and turned into his own room to avoid the draught.

Wrapped once more in her rain cloak Lilly hoisted her umbrella, facing the thick drizzle and sudden gusts of wind as she waited in the high road for an omnibus (it was too far to walk in such weather to the bifurcation of the roads at Knightsbridge); a gentleman rushing past in heedless haste knocked her umbrella out of her hand and it fell in the mud. He stopped, with an expression of distress on a plain, honest, intelligent face and in his fine dark blue eyes.

"I am awfully sorry and ashamed of myself for being so heedless. I hope I didn't twist your wrist?"

"No, thank goodness. You have done enough; just look at my umbrella!"

"Yes, it's in an awful state. Pray take mine instead."

"No, no," laughing; "that would be a bad exchange. There are two holes in mine."

"Never mind; do take it."

"It doesn't matter. The mud will come off when it's dry, and I shall take the first omnibus."

"Let me wait and put you into it."

"I thought you were in a hurry."

"I don't think I shall ever be in a hurry again."

"Still, you need not wait; I am accustomed to do everything for myself."

"I am sure you do not seem fit to fight for yourself," looking down on her good-naturedly from his six feet of stature.

"There, there is the Piccadilly omnibus."

The stranger hailed it and handed her in with simple kindness that eliminated all effrontery from his perhaps familiar manner.

When, nearly an hour afterwards Mrs. Stepney returned from a fatiguing tramp, in search of apartments and to interview some possible pupils to whom her friend, the bride elect, had given her introductions, she found Lilly Sandys still sitting in the middle of the room in her damp cloak and hat, her umbrella dropped on the floor beside her, and the grate overflowing with dust and ashes, but no fire.

"Why, you foolish, tiresome child! what are you sitting there for in your wet things? do you want to bring on a fresh attack of neuralgia? Get up this moment and take them off."

"I am too tired; and I don't care."

Mrs. Stepney, who was a tall bony woman, made a dart at her small chum and, seizing her arm, almost lifted her from her seat.

"Come now, Lilly, no nonsense; off with them."

"You are an awful woman!" returned Lilly smiling as she slowly

obeyed. "But everything was so miserable when I came in I could only sit down. These London lodgings; the wretched mean little houses, and the poor dirty servant who never has anything on, except what looks like the cast-off rags of a fine lady. Oh, I shall not be able to live here. Poverty is so much more picturesque in Paris; and one's own room or two rooms are really a home. Here the landlady, with her curiosity and her horrid attentions, makes you feel she can turn you out in a moment. Then the roof is so low and the grate so dirty. How much nicer a clean stove is."

"Nonsense, Lilly; a bright fire is worth a dozen stoves. When we get into better rooms you will think differently. Go; get your things off. Good heavens! what a state your umbrella is in."

"Yes, but I don't mind. He had such beautiful eyes."

"Who had beautiful eyes?"

"The man that did it."

"Did what?"

"Knocked my umbrella into the mud."

"Was he blind, then?"

"No; in a hurry."

"You will catch your death of cold if you don't hurry up and get off your boots."

"Oh, it doesn't matter now; I have sat in them so long," and Lilly walked away very deliberately.

Mrs. Stepney then laid aside her wraps rapidly but methodically and rang for the servant, with whose help, or rather in spite of her help, she soon had the grate cleared and the fire burning cheerfully; then she retired to put herself in order.

Mrs. Stepney was a woman whose age it was difficult to fix. Her tall, slim figure and elastic step suggested youth; so did her keen bright steel-grey eyes, her abundant hair; but her features, though tolerably regular, were hard and set; wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes were well developed; and her hair was iron grey in colour, wiry in texture and crisply waved. Though an artist of no mean order she was careful and neat, and in no way communicative or genial. No one knew much about her, save that she came from Australia, years before, when quite young, and studied art both in Paris and in Italy, that she was a childless widow and had turned to art again for occupation, some thought support.

She and Lilly had met in a *pension de dames* where that young girl had been placed, after a severe struggle, and a good deal owing to Lady de Walden's backing up. Dissimilar in every respect, the oddly assorted couple, who worked in the same studio, where Mrs. Stepney was a sort of assistant, became fast friends, and when the latter set up in an apartment of her own, about three months after Lilly went to Paris, the young orphan gladly agreed to become her *pensionnaire*. Then Mrs. Stepney started a studio,

wherein, for the last six months of her stay in the Gallic capital, Lilly also worked.

Of near relatives, or indeed distant ones either, Lilly had very few—a sister of her father, an uncle of her mother, both provincial Philistines—who were careful not to interfere, lest meddling should entail contribution, so the girl was left very much to her own devices.

The servant was laying the cloth when Lilly came down stairs, looking considerably refreshed by her hasty toilette, though some half-dried mud still adhered to the hem of her dress. She stood looking out of the window rather disconsolately.

"Dinner is quite ready, Lil," said Mrs. Stepney. Lilly turned and, walking straight to the table, scrutinized the dinner. It was very simple, a small piece of cold roast beef and a dish of mashed potatoes.

"I don't like cold beef, and the potatoes are not even browned," said Lil plaintively.

"Never mind, child. Have some bread and butter. When we are regularly settled I will teach the servant how to cook."

Lilly shook her head and took her place.

"What have you done to-day, Lilly?" asked Mrs. Stepney when the cloth had been rolled up in a wisp and removed, as she rose to take a seed cake from the inevitable chiffonier and set it before her discontented chum.

"Not much. I went to see my godfather, General Granard. He was gracious enough, but rather glad to get rid of me, I think, for he expected some fine ladies to tea, and of course *I* was not fit to be seen.

"Well, you generally *are* untidy."

"How can I help it? He doesn't like me to be an artist. He thinks it would be more decent and becoming if I were a nursery governess in a respectable family. Fancy how much they would learn from *me*."

"You are certainly more fitted for the line you have adopted."

There was a short pause, then Lilly said, more to herself than to her companion, "She will not come up till after Christmas."

"Who will not?"

"Lady de Walden. I shall be so glad to see her. Perhaps she will let me paint her portrait."

"That would not be a bad idea. We must both try to get into the Academy this year, though I don't suppose we have much chance. But we can have a show day, the great lever to get hold of is notoriety."

"I don't feel as if I should ever do any good work," said Lilly sadly. "When I have not been painting for a week I always grow desponding and miserable; then I am such an ugly little thing nobody cares for me but you, and why you care for me I can't think."

"It is rather curious," said Mrs. Stepney with a smile, a more caressing smile than her strong grave face, at first sight, seemed capable of bestowing. "When you have these fits, Lill, you are miserable about everything; you ought to take some iron."

Lilly shrugged her shoulders. "Did you see any of the people you went to look for?"

"Yes; two of the possible pupils were at home. One will come, I think, three times a week; I am not sure of the other. They are mere Philistines, but they can pay."

"I shall never teach," decidedly.

"Needs must when necessity holds the whip. You must make money or you will starve, and if you are driven to live in other people's houses in a semi-genteel dependent way you'll die, Lill."

"I hope I should. I often think life isn't worth the trouble it costs."

"We'll not discuss that now," returned Mrs. Stepney grimly. "You have an uncommonly bad fit on, I see. You must go down to the studio to-morrow morning and put your things in order. My friend Miss Paton will be there. She has a picture to finish before she clears out, and I hope she will not regret laying down her mahlstick to take up what is often a broken reed—I mean a husband. Why women can't make a religion of art, renouncing the world, its worries, and weddings, as nuns do for their faith, I don't understand."

"I am sure I don't know. Still, I think I should like to marry—if—only one could change about."

"You are a little heathen! But do you know I think I saw rooms that might suit us. They are quite near the studio, and better and cheaper than these."

"Why in the world did you not take them?"

"Because the owner was not sure she could let them just yet, some relation may want them, she said, but she promised to let me know."

"What are they like?"

"Well, the outside is rather tumble down—it is a villa, that is, it stands far enough back from the road to permit of one's getting well wet before one can reach a cab. But there is a good-sized sitting-room with two windows and a balcony, a small bedroom behind, and a larger one upstairs. The woman of the house is a good-humoured, untidy-looking person."

"Then everything would be uncomfortable, but it doesn't matter."

"I think it does; if we go there I shall manage the landlady. Now, Lill, do get the hearth-brush and sweep up the crumbs; turn back the end of the rug. No one will think of looking for them there; and then help me to tidy the place a little; I rather think Phil Lester, the man who did that picture of 'Ruth among the Corn,' will call. I knew him in Paris ages ago. He has made

a name for himself since then; but in my humble opinion there is more character in his corn than in his Ruth!" Lilly rose lazily and assisted her friend to put the room in order. "I have a letter to write," said Mrs. Stepney; "and do you care to look at the *World* before I send it away?"

"No, thank you, I would rather trim my hat."

CHAPTER V.

MRS. REPTON.

THE ardent desire of Claire de Walden was accomplished; she was once more settled in her beloved home, with her husband and her son.

Yet all was different, outwardly nothing seemed changed; Lord de Walden hunted and shot, and sometimes stayed to luncheon at the Grange; occasionally he rode with his wife, but when he did, he found fault with her seat, her hand, her want of nerve and many other more trifling deficiencies. "In short," he summed up one fine, crisp afternoon as they were riding towards home, "you did not begin young enough, and nothing will make you a good horsewoman."

"I have no doubt you are right, Guy," she returned quickly with a slight tremor in her voice; "so as my shortcomings evidently annoy you, and I should never have attempted to ride for my own individual pleasure, I shall give it up and be content with my humbler pony carriage."

"Why, Claire! I did not think you were so touchy, it seems to me that your stay in Paris has upset you. You are not a bit like the same woman."

Lady de Walden resolutely kept back the words that sprang to her lips, she felt that her husband was in no mood to bear recrimination. When she had conquered the gust of anger and fear which swept over her, fear lest some cloud had come between Guy's heart and hers, she said quietly, "Yes, I think I was a little vexed! Still, apart from my touchiness, why need I worry you with my company if I do not ride well? I will give you a lift in my phaeton sometimes, and that will make things equal, so do not trouble about me."

"Oh, nonsense! things put one out sometimes which one doesn't mind at another. But if there's anything I especially admire, it's a woman who can ride well and boldly. There's something awfully taking in witching horsewomanship."

"Let me take riding lessons with Stephen Ferrars. He is very patient, and rides splendidly himself, then I shall surprise you some day."

Lord de Walden turned and looked into the steadfast eyes of

his wife, then a smile sparkled in his own. "No, my dear, I don't fancy appointing him your riding master—besides—he much prefers riding with Mrs. Repton. I met them *tête-à-tête* without even a groom, at the far side of Lea Woods yesterday towards dusk. I daresay Stephen fancies he is making a deep impression there; he is a conceited fellow in spite of his grave airs."

"I cannot believe that, Guy. He is too earnest and real for conceit. I have often wondered what it is that makes him so silent and cynical. He has everything a man can possibly want, except a sweet, sympathetic wife."

"Hum! Are you ready to supply the need with your friend, Mrs. Repton?"

"No, indeed; only Stephen's own choice could supply that, besides, I do not think Mrs. Repton likes him."

"Oh, indeed! Really Claire your insight is remarkable, yet I cannot agree with you. Perhaps you think the *dis-like* is reciprocal?"

"No, I think Stephen, who knew her in her husband's lifetime, is very sorry for her. He says she had an awful life."

"Ha! pity is akin to love, they say. Do keep your horse alive, Claire, you don't care how he draws along," and Lord de Walden laid a strong hand on his wife's rein, startling her horse into a sudden sideway curvet, which shook her in her seat. "There! by Jove! you were nearly off, I wish you could sit closer." This occurred close to the park gates, and the rest of the way was accomplished in silence.

Lord de Walden lifted Claire from her saddle, and followed her into the house. On a table in the hall lay several notes and letters for both, and Claire began to look at hers.

"Such good accounts from my father," she said presently, "and a note from Mrs. Repton; she asks if I shall be at home on Wednesday as she wants to call and bid me good-bye—she is going to London."

"Oh! Suppose she is getting sick of the Grange."

"I thought she was going to make it her head quarters," returned Lady de Walden. "I must take off my habit before I write to her," and she began to mount the stairs, followed by her husband.

At the door of her dressing-room he called her in a low tone, "Claire!" She turned quickly; he held out his arms, "I believe I have been an ill-tempered brute! Let us kiss and be friends."

"Dear Guy," she murmured, pressing close against him and gladly returning his kiss. "You were not so nice as usual! We are both very human, we may hurt each now and then; but oh! let us always be ready to forgive."

"You are too much of an angel for me, I am afraid," returned de Walden, with a touch of sadness, and Claire—his voice echoing in her ears—went to her room where her maid awaited her.

"Give me a dressing gown," she said, when her toilette was nearly finished; "I will sit here and read; come to me in an hour."

Left to herself, she took the first volume which came to her hand, and nestled into an armchair, she opened her book and laid it in her lap, not making even a pretence to read. She was profoundly disturbed, alarmed, unspeakably pained.

"He is utterly, completely altered," she said, communing with her aching heart. "I am no longer what I was to him, and he is dearer—no, dearer he could not be—but as dear as ever to me! Now, when with me, his thoughts are far away—he does not want me always—and his kisses! Language has no words to describe the subtle change of his kisses, they are but the ghosts of the past. What have I done? Where have I erred? Not in staying with my father? It was my duty, *that* did not anger him. What shall I do? I cannot live without his love, his true, complete companionship; can the cruel winter of indifference be creeping over the lovely summer of our affection? I cannot bear it, I will *not* bear it. I do not deserve it! Oh, heaven! it is no question of desert. But I will not let him go; I will hold him—I will win him back. What can I do? Has he wearied of me? Then I must not drive him further away by complaints, or bitter words or melancholy looks. I will be strong and patient, and seem to see no change; it may be some mere variation of mood. Men will not always remain lovers, but Guy loves none other. I am—I always will be—first of women to *him*, even though I cease to be all essential. Time may bring further changes. Let him always find *me* the same, loving, ready to bear any grief for him—strong, true. He *must* love me, or is he irresponsible? Can he not govern his heart? Is it not amenable to the power of the will? And in what does 'will' consist? If devotion and wifely duty cannot command my husband's love, cannot keep his affection, am I to hang trembling on the balance of his fickle fancy? Dear as he is, there is something slavish and degrading in the idea. Ah! What is the use of reasoning? Degrading or not, I *do* hang upon the fluctuations of his fancy! The tones of his voice chill my heart or fill it with a living glow. Does he perceive this; and does it weary him? What is wisest and best to do? I cannot tell. Perhaps I ought to ask if I have vexed him; pleasantly, frankly, without whining or anger. Between us there ought to be, there used to be, unbounded confidence. I will. It is only right to give him an opportunity to find fault, to explain, to— There, I will not think any more; I only weaken myself. But reading is out of the question."

She closed her book and put it in its place; then she sat down at her writing table and wrote, first to Mrs. Repton, then at some length to her father.

"Poor Eva," she thought, as she addressed her note to the former. "Hers has been a hard life. Even at school she had no

treats, and how revolting it must have been to live with a husband such as hers! I have felt a little hard towards her! I wonder if Stephen Ferrars really cares for her? She is very handsome, and can be very sweet, but would she be a good wife for him? I do not feel at all sure!—nor that he would be always a kind husband!”

Before she had quite finished her writing, her maid knocked at the door.

“Do you know if Lord de Walden is in the house?”

“He is not, my lady. I saw him walking across the grounds towards the home farm.”

“Then I will not dress till dinner-time. I shall go to the nursery. Tell me, Milward, do you think I could wear my grey silk with the black lace?”

“I am not sure, my lady. I think you have grown thinner. But if you would not mind trying it on, I could soon make any little alteration. It would be nice to see you in colours again, my lady.”

Claire sighed.

“I believe I have worn black too long,” she said.

“Quite a year and a half, my lady—and if you’ll excuse my saying it—you are looking too pale and thin for all black to be becoming, my lady.”

“I think I shall write to Madame Valerie for some new dresses. There will be a ball in Blancheater some time soon after Christmas. I must have something pretty and new for it.”

“I am sure it is time your ladyship had some new things,” returned the lady’s maid in an aggrieved tone. “Would you mind trying the grey dress? I am sure it won’t want much doing to,” she added eagerly.

Rather to her surprise, Lady de Walden assented, and it was found that a slight alteration would make the dress wearable.

“Valerie certainly has taste,” remarked Lady de Walden, contemplating herself in the long glass.

“Indeed, my lady, that dress always became you, and I will put it all right before dinner.”

Lady de Walden resumed her dressing gown, and made her way to her boy’s apartments, which were not far off. There she found the young gentleman in a towering rage, and trying with all his might to knock down the under nurse, who was alone with him for the moment.

“Why, Gerald! What is the matter?”

“I want to go out to father. I saw him go across down there,” pointing through the window, “and she stopped me. I *will* beat her and kill her—she is a nasty, cross, wicked thing,” and the irate young gentleman tried to fly at her again.

“No, Gerald, you shall not! Mary is always kind and good to you. Come here, let me know what it is all about.”

"Well, my lady," said the girl, who looked quite distressed, "you see, nurse said the young master was not to go out, when he saw my lord go past, for it was too late, and he was vexed at that. As soon as Mrs. Burrows went down to speak to the laundry-maid, Master Gerald ran to get his hat, and it was because I prevented him he was so angry."

"I wanted to go with father," sobbed the young man.

"Dear child! do you not know we never refuse you what is good and right. See, it is nearly dark already, and so cold! and is it like a gentleman to strike a girl who is always nice and kind to you?"

"She is not nice—she is nasty and disagreeable."

"Come away with mother, and try to be good; when you see you have been naughty and unkind, Mary will kiss you, and make friends."

"I don't want to kiss her—but I will go with you, mother."

Lady de Walden had generally a soothing effect on her son, who had a fiery temper, and was, in spite of her best efforts, somewhat spoiled. Lord de Walden was immensely proud of his boy, who, though handsomer than his father, was extremely like him—every whim of the son and heir would have been gratified but for Claire's influence and remonstrance.

Alone with his mother in her dressing-room, Gerald soon grew calm and deeply interested in the life and adventures of a bad boy, invented by his mother for his special benefit, and when, before dressing for dinner, Lady de Walden took him back to the nursery, she paused at the door and asked, "What are you going to say to Mary?" he answered:

"I'll give her a kiss—but she *was* nasty!"

"And you were naughty?"

"Oh, yes! not very, though!" he ran to the much-enduring Mary, who gratefully received a hearty hug.

"He is a forgiving dear," said the head nurse complacently.

"And not at all repentant," added his mother, with a sigh.

It was a long time since Claire felt so deep an interest in her toilette; for a wonder she was a little difficult to please about the dressing of her hair, but at length it was accomplished to her satisfaction—an aureole of golden fringe crowned her brow, while the mass of her splendid hair was coiled on the top of her small head. The interest, even anxiety, of dressing had given her a slight tinge of colour, and the grace of her delicate costume with its falls of filmy black lace, went well with the refinement of her bearing.

Lord de Walden was standing on the hearthrug, apparently lost in thought, when his wife entered. They were to dine *tête-à-tête*, which was not often the case.

Lady de Walden came and stood beside him, but he did not pay any attention. She laid her hand softly on his arm. "What are you thinking of, Guy?"

"Oh! a hundred and one things," not noticing her hand. "By-the-bye, I hope you answered that note?"

"What note?" withdrawing her hand to open her fan.

"Why, Mrs. Repton's, of course."

"Oh, yes! I sent my answer over to the Grange before six o'clock. I wonder, if Mrs. Repton is going to leave the Thorpes, why she refused that appointment Willie offered her?"

"What appointment?"

Lady de Walden began to explain, but the announcement of dinner interrupted her, and Lord de Walden offered her his arm.

For the first part of the meal the master of the house was pre-occupied and silent. Then he seemed to pull himself together, and spoke of some colts he had been inspecting in the paddocks adjoining the home farm, of some Berkshire pigs the steward had bought, and a new-fashioned grass-cutter. To all of which Claire "did seriously incline," though her foolish heart sank lower and lower as the minutes passed, and he did not seem to see that her dress was in any way different from usual—indeed, he scarcely seemed to see herself. Yet she talked well and brightly, even while she determined to take advantage of their being alone together to put the questions he had resolved to ask.

"You don't suppose Mrs. Repton would have undertaken the post of schoolmistress to a set of charity children?" said de Walden suddenly, after a short pause.

"Did Willie tell you about it?" asked his wife, surprised.

"I know all about it, of course!"

"It would have been unpleasant, I daresay. Still, it is not nice to be dependent on the best and nearest of relations, so perhaps——"

"I protest you women have no feeling whatever for each other," interrupted de Walden. "Just imagine such a creature as—as Mrs. Repton, full of life, made for warmth and pleasure, shut up in a wild, remote country, with the cares of such an establishment on her shoulders! Why, it would kill her in a year!"

"It would be very trying."

"Trying, I believe you; that brother of yours is a regular fanatic to think of such a thing."

"Let us go to the drawing-room, I have not looked at the papers to-day," said Claire, wondering at his vehemence, which seemed to her uncalled for.

"I will join you directly," returned de Walden. But he did not join her for half an hour. When he did, she was almost hidden behind the huge sheet of the *Times*, which she laid down at her husband's approach, and took some fancy work from an ornamental basket.

Lord de Walden threw himself on an ottoman near, looking greatly bored.

"Where's the boy?" he asked. "May he not come down after dinner? I never see him."

"It is too late for such a little fellow to be up, Guy; but he can always come to us before dinner, and if you are in earlier you can have a game of play with him."

De Walden made no reply; he stretched out his hand for the paper she had laid down. Lady de Walden rose and crossed to where he was sitting; placing herself beside, and a little behind him, she took the hand which lay idly on the cushion and clasped it gently in both her own.

"Guy, will you answer me a question frankly?" she asked in pleasant, cheerful tones.

He did not withdraw his hand, but it lay lifelessly in hers.

"Yes; I will answer a dozen, if you like—and—am I ever anything but frank?"

"You are, indeed, always frank, dear." He felt the soft little hands which held his tremble. "Well, Guy, I want you to tell me if anything has vexed or distressed you? Are you displeased with me—or—oh, Guy, don't you know you are not a bit like yourself?"

"Why, Claire, I might just as well ask *you* the same question! I never knew you fanciful or unreasonable before. What has put such an idea into your head? There is nothing the matter with me—I am the same as ever; a little bored, perhaps, with the long spell of seclusion we have had since the poor baby died. You know you looked miserable whenever I wanted you to ask people——"

"But, Guy, I never objected to receive any one. Nor did you often ask me to do so, and then you went to and fro to town."

"If you were more sympathetic you would have understood what I wanted," returned Lord de Walden, drawing away his hand. "Why, Claire, you are not going to weep over your fancies!"

"Weep; no, certainly not!" she exclaimed, mastering her voice by a resolute effort. "There is nothing to weep for."

"I should hope not. Now suppose we have a game of billiards instead of sentimentalizing here."

"By all means. It is an age since I played," she returned, rising with alacrity, though her heart was torn with pain and disappointment.

She had indeed been answered. Something impassable and impalpable had come between them. It might drift away as mysteriously as it had come, but it would always remain a mystery; while her sense of security—that heavenly restfulness which comes of complete belief in the fidelity of one's best-beloved—could never be restored. Of this melancholy truth she was scarcely conscious, yet she resolved not to despair; to-morrow—next week—the cloud might disperse, meantime if he did not choose to speak she could not make him. She therefore steeled herself and played her best, largely assisted in her effort to be natural and

composed by a rising sense of indignation at the unaccountable and undeserved coldness of her husband.

* * * * *

The Wednesday fixed by Mrs. Repton for her farewell visit was wet and stormy in the morning. Still, Claire expected her, as weather does not count much when carriages and horses are at one's command.

By one o'clock the heavy rainfall had stilled the storm, and the clouds began to break. Lady de Walden sat reading in her morning-room, which occupied an angle of the mansion looking south-west, and opening on a conservatory from which steps led to the garden. The ground at this side sloped somewhat steeply from the house, giving a view of the wooded dell which bounded the park on the west, with a portion of the steep rugged cliff behind it, on which the old towers of Beaumont Royal were perched. It was her favourite room and bore the stamp of her individuality in the books, music, photographs and needlework with which it was abundantly supplied. The walls, of delicate grey, were decorated with bright watercolour drawings of Italian scenes—a commission from Lord de Walden to a famous artist. The hangings were of pale grey chintz with a charming pattern of roses and foliage; it was altogether as dainty a "lady's bower" as could be invented. Claire felt unusually cheerful—her husband had been bright and friendly at breakfast, and had taken some degree of interest in the changes she proposed in the arrangement of the garden near her special end of the house.

"Mr. Ferrars, my lady!" said a footman, opening the door.

"Ah, Stephen! you have not been near us for three whole days," said Lady de Walden, holding out her hand.

"I have been busy," returned Ferrars, taking it for an instant and then dropping into a chair.

"Busy, Stephen? Are you ever busy?"

"I am, mentally, much occupied."

Claire smiled, meeting his eyes.

"Then I am very glad you have torn yourself from your occupations, for Mrs. Repton is coming to luncheon, and Guy is not always as friendly to her as I like; you may atone."

"Very well," he returned with his usual quiet indifference. "I am glad to see you looking better, Claire."

"Why—have I not looked well?"

"No; not at all. Your eyes gave me the impression that some half-alive soul looked through them, and your air was listless—to-day, some electric spark has touched you."

"You are not complimentary, Stephen."

"I never am. We are not on complimentary terms—we are too good friends for that; and I do not like to see the kind of crushed look you have lately worn."

"Crushed! What nonsense! There is nothing to crush me. What have I to complain of?"

"That *you* only can tell," fixing his keen, dark eyes upon hers.

The colour rose in Lady de Walden's cheek. Could this silent observant man have observed the change in his cousin which was so perceptible to herself?—the idea humiliated her. Before she could reply Lord de Walden, with a bright, animated expression on his countenance, came into the room, exclaiming to Mrs. Repton, who followed him, "Yes, here she is."

Lady de Walden went forward and greeted her kindly. "So sorry it is such a miserable wet morning for you!"

"The worst is over," returned Mrs. Repton. "And Mrs. Thorpe left me here on her way to Edenborough."

She accepted the chair placed for her by Ferrars with a smiling, "How d'ye do," but did not offer him her hand.

She was looking exceedingly handsome in a dress of dark blue cashmere and velvet, fitting her symmetrical figure perfectly, yet so easily that its graceful lines showed unrestrained as she moved or sat with almost voluptuous ease. A small becoming bonnet of blue plush set off her rich complexion and dark velvety-brown eyes admirably.

Then a few commonplaces were exchanged, and luncheon being announced, Lord de Walden offered his arm to the chief guest.

"I am so thankful Guy came in good time," said Claire in a low tone as she followed with Ferrars. "He does not heed *les convenances* sufficiently, and somehow I do not fancy he quite likes Mrs. Repton."

"Indeed! I am not sure he does exactly *like* her," returned Ferrars with a grim sort of smile.

Luncheon passed pleasantly. Mrs. Repton was rather silent, but Lord de Walden talked a great deal in the bright, boyish strain which was natural to him. His wife and kinsman contributed their share, and when the servants withdrew conversation grew more confidential.

"I hear you are going to forsake us, Mrs. Repton," said Lord de Walden, filling her glass with wonderful "Steinberger Cabinet."

"Yes, I am absolutely going—going next week."

"I am very sorry," said Lady de Walden earnestly; she was thinking that her former schoolfellow would be homeless. "You will be a great loss to Mrs. Thorpe."

"She is not going to lose me, dear Lady de Walden; she is coming with me, or, rather, after me."

"Indeed!" ejaculated de Walden. Ferrars did not speak, he devoted all his attention to the nuts he was breaking for his hostess.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Repton. "I have persuaded Mrs. Thorpe to come to town for the winter. I am sure a regular course of treatment under some great London specialist would do wonders

for her poor invalid husband, and in many ways winter in town would be better for herself."

"I daresay it would," remarked Claire thoughtfully.

"Besides these considerations, I feel I am losing my time here." She looked down and played with the fringe of her d'oyley. "No home is safe which you do not make for yourself. I want to take up my singing again. You remember, dear Lady de Walden, I used to be the 'show girl' at school (forgive this bit of boasting), and I propose trying to collect a *clientèle* to give singing lessons to. I might, as the servants say, 'make a living.'"

"What an awful business!" exclaimed Lord de Walden.

"Yes, it would be very trying," added his wife. "Have you quite decided not to accept my brother's suggestion?"

"I did decide. I was obliged to decide at the time, for Mrs. Thorpe begged me not to leave her. Now, of course, I have lost my chance."

"You'd have cut your throat there in six weeks," cried Lord de Walden. "Take a little more Steinberger."

"No, no, I could not, thank you!"

"I fancy London would suit you better than the country," observed Stephen Ferrars in his harsh, deep tones.

"No doubt you do," cried Mrs. Repton, with a quick upward flashing glance. "I daresay you fancy the Bohemianism of London life would suit me better than the sobriety and Philistinism of the country."

"I am not aware that I implied any such conviction."

"You ought not to leave the Thorpes, Mrs. Repton," said de Walden seriously. "You are a perfect godsend to them, and they will not let you go I am sure."

"I am *not* sure! Moreover, I am an unreasonable, exacting woman I fear, but I long to have a home, ever so small a home of my own, just two rooms, where, as the song says, 'I can laugh when I am merry, and sigh when I am sad.' You would come and see me, Lady de Walden, however lowly—yet lofty—my lodging might be?" And there was just the slightest break in her clear tones.

"Yes, certainly, even were it 'on the cold ground,'" returned Lady de Walden kindly, yet smiling at Mrs. Repton's air of picturesque destitution.

"It is an infamous shame that you have to think of these miserable details!" cried de Walden, colouring in the earnestness of his sympathy.

"To bear is to conquer one's fate!" returned Mrs. Repton gaily.

"You are very brave," said Claire admiringly. "I sometimes amuse myself conjecturing what I should do if I ever wanted to support myself."

"An idle speculation indeed," put in Ferrars smiling.

"It may be, but I am interested in it. It humiliates me to

think I can do nothing well enough to earn money. No one seems to me safe who has not the means of existence in their heads or hands."

Lady de Walden is developing a genius for social science," said her husband. "She spends her money subscribing to various undertakings intended to fit women for independence of the tyrant man!"

"Your money, dear Guy!"

"By no means! Your very own. If you choose to divert it from its original use of buying clothes and jewels and pretty things, that is your affair."

"I had no idea you were a strong-minded woman," cried Mrs. Repton, looking curiously at her hostess.

"Strong, me! Oh, I have no strength at all, and only very confused ideas of right and justice, but I do think it must be very sweet to earn one's own bread, to owe everything to your own work. I believe people will grow to think this more and more."

"I am afraid I am an old-fashioned kind of woman," said Mrs. Repton sadly. "To me it is always sweet to think of owing everything to the man you love, to repay it with passionate devotion; at least that was my idea. I cannot say I realized it."

Ferrars laughed. "An admirable doctrine, especially for the men who can afford a large supply of *things*."

"Isn't that a rude speech?" cried Mrs. Repton, shaking her head at him. Lord de Walden was silent, but a look of annoyance gathered in his eyes.

"Now, Lady de Walden, let me see your dear boy? He will be quite a great creature before I come back; if I come back."

"Certainly; come to my room and I will send for him." And rising, Lady Claire led the way to the boudoir where they had assembled. Mrs. Repton did not sit down, she moved slowly from picture to picture, recognising some scenes, commenting on all.

"I did not know you had seen so much of Italy," observed Claire.

"Oh, yes! We had several seasons at Monte Carlo, and when poor Mr. Repton was lucky, he liked to travel for a few weeks. Oh, what a dreadful time it was! When I think of the degradation of it, I feel I ought not to force myself on you—you beautiful, innocent, fair, fortunate woman." She turned sharply towards Lady de Walden as she uttered these words, a little louder and more energetically than usual, so was probably not aware that while she spoke de Walden entered by a door behind her.

"Do not say so, dear Mrs. Repton," said Claire kindly. "The evil you disapprove and do not share cannot touch you. I do hope there are brighter days in store for you. Here is the boy. Gerald, go and speak to Mrs. Repton." Thus exhorted, the future lord of Beaumont Royal walked across to where Mrs. Repton had seated herself on a low chair, and holding out his hand, made a neat little bow and said "How do you do?"

"You dear little preux chevalier," cried Mrs. Repton, drawing him to her and lifting him on her knee. "I am sure you are a great darling, and oh! how like your father!" She gazed at him intently for a moment, and then folding him to her heart she kissed him with fervour. Raising her head again her eyes met those of Ferrars who was standing behind Lady de Walden's chair. The colour flushed up to the roots of her hair, and then passing away left her quite pale.

"Will you come and live with me, sweet one?" she asked, stroking the boy's red-gold curls.

"I can only live with mother," said the little fellow gravely.

"But *I* have no dear little boy; I am quite alone."

"If I went to *you*, mother would have no little boy either," said the child thoughtfully.

"But she has your father, dear."

"Father is not a little boy." Evidently convinced that his father could not supply his place.

Mrs. Repton laughed. "You know your own value, my little master. No, do not go away. Look at these pretty things!" and she gave him the bunch of charms which hung from her watch to play with. A little more talk of Mr. and Mrs. Thorpe's plans, of the best medical authority to consult for the invalid, a droll story or two of some county notabilities, and Mrs. Repton said she must tear herself away.

"Why don't you come and live here? You are such a nice, pretty lady!" asked the boy putting his arms round her neck and lifting his sweet childish face to kiss her.

"Too much happiness for me, darling," she said tenderly, as she embraced him and then lifted him down.

"It is still early," said Lady de Walden.

"I promised to return early, and I must go."

"Then I will order the carriage," stretching out her hand to the bell.

"No, my dear Lady de Walden, I want to walk back. The wind has dried the roads, and it is quite fine now. I want to enjoy that charming path across the moorland to the Grange, before I turn my back on it for ever, as I feel I shall."

"I trust your presentiment deceives you," said Claire. "I should enjoy walking part of the way with you, but that I have a slight cold which I fear to increase."

"I will be Mrs. Repton's escort, if she will permit me," said Ferrars with decision.

"I shall be very glad of your company," returned Mrs. Repton with a gracious smile, though a change passed over her face. Lord de Walden made a movement as if to speak, but checked himself. *Adieux* were exchanged and Lord de Walden accompanied his guests to the door. Returning to his wife's sitting-room he met his son and heir scampering down the corridor. "Where

are you off to, sir?" cried his father catching him in his arms.

"Let me go, father, let me go. I am going to have a ride! Old Rogers is to come with me."

"All right, my boy, I am going to ride too."

"Oh, may I come with you—it would be jolly."

"No, you could not keep up with me. I want to have a good gallop. There—you may go."

Entering the morning-room, Lord de Walden stood silently on the rug for some minutes. His wife had taken up her embroidery, but presently she dropped it in her lap, and raising her soft eyes to his, said, "I did not know my own folly before. Can you imagine it, Guy? When Mrs. Repton asked Gerald to be *her* boy, and when he put his dear arms round her, I felt a strange pang. I could have taken him from her. Poor woman, I wish she had a son or daughter of her own—it might be a burden, but it would be a tower of strength too."

"Considerably more of a burden I imagine! Her life may be changed for the better if, as I fancy, he, Stephen, takes a fancy to her. He seems inclined to make a fool of himself."

"Why a fool?"

"Oh, perhaps you think she is disposed to be gracious to him," returned de Walden with a contemptuous laugh, "and you—you are only jealous of the boy? Not of your husband?"

"I would not dream of insulting you by a doubt, dear Guy."

Lord de Walden laughed again and left the room.

(To be continued.)

LONDON LETTERS,

TO VARIOUS COUNTRY COUSINS.

No. IX.

DEAR COUSINS,

If you would like to do something really useful and not in the least disagreeable, join a Needlework Guild. The members need only send in two articles each in the year, so that the conditions are not very hard.

The Report for 1889 of the London Needlework Guild has just been issued. The Duchess of Teck and her daughter, Princess May, are among the presidents of this excellent society, which, started some years ago by Giana, Lady Wolverton, has done so much to supply the poor of London and its vicinity with warm clothing.

The number of articles sent in for distribution last year was 30,367, being an increase of nearly 7,000 upon the figures of the previous year. The great bulk of the contributions were for women and children, comparatively few having been sent for men. The Guild would like to see an increase in this direction. About thirty outfits for young servants were distributed, most useful presents to a struggling mother who finds it difficult to provide her girls with the clothes necessary for undertaking service. Blankets and quilts, some of the latter being lined with very thick and warm materials, were very acceptable gifts, and the secretary, Miss Geraldine F. Halford, accords warm praise to the senders of comfortable stuff gowns and petticoats for women, and to the knitters of some well-made socks and stockings for men.

Not so commendable are the donors of silk ties, fancy collars, muslin aprons and opera hoods. Dark materials are preferred to white by the poor, to whom the constant washing needed by white garments is but additional labour and expense. More knitted stockings for women and girls are wanted, and associates are informed through the medium of the Report, that the poor men in London (except the cabmen) prefer socks to stockings. In the country the latter are liked best.

The necessary expenses of the Guild are met by an annual subscription of 7s. 6d. from each president. The cost of receiving and distributing the articles amounted to £11 15s., a surprisingly small sum, considering the large numbers dealt with. There

are branches of the Needlework Guild all over England, but in several counties it is not as yet represented. The foundress, Giana, Lady Wolverton, Coombe Wood, Kingston-on-Thames, gives the necessary information to those who wish to join in the good work.

Have you heard of M. Onofroff, whose thought-reading performances have made such an impression in London? He is a young Russian, who studied medicine at the Medical College in St. Petersburg, and afterwards at Toulouse. He is only twenty-five now, but had already interested himself in hypnotism some ten years ago, though it was only within the last two or three that he has found himself able to "read thoughts." He does wonderful things, and is quite free from the distressing uncertainty that characterized the movements of some of the English thought-readers. Nor is personal contact necessary with him, which is fortunate, since it obviates the ludicrous sight of one man being dragged along at full speed by another, regardless of the dignity of either. When M. Onofroff is under the influence of his self-imposed hypnotism, his lips contract and he darts off in the direction of the object, finds it at once and either picks it up or points it out, as the person, under whose influence he has placed himself, may have willed. He made a great sensation in Paris about a year ago. On one occasion, four different articles, such as gloves, watch, &c., were taken from four different people during his absence from the room and hidden in various places. When he returned, the person who had hidden them controlled the thought-reader, and immediately, without even approaching him, M. Onofroff found the four things and returned each one correctly to its right owner. It was all done in a few seconds, and there was no contact between the person who knew where they were and whose they were, and the hypnotised "reader." When the effort is over, he is exhausted by the past tension of nerves necessary for his feats.

An anecdote about Miss Mary Anderson hails from New York, and is to the effect that this charming woman, who is a very devout Catholic, recently sought and obtained permission to scrub the floor of the London Hospital in the Whitechapel Road. The reason she gave for this very unusual request was that she felt a spirit of pride rising within her and that consequently she wished to undertake this act of penance.

Mr. F. W. Robinson, author of "Grandmother's Money" and many other delightful books, is contributing a serial, called "The Keeper of the Keys," to the weekly supplement of the *Leeds Mercury*. It commenced on the 4th of January. In the same issue appeared the first instalment of "Life in London," by Detective-Inspector Meiklejohn, formerly of Scotland Yard, and author of one or two books that deal with his own special experiences while in the force.

Lady Carmarthen is a follower of the fashion now general among the ladies of the English aristocracy, viz.:—that of producing a book. Since the Queen became an authoress it has been the correct thing to do. The Marchioness of Stafford wrote “How I Spent My Twentieth Year.” The Marchioness of Carmarthen has called her book “A Lover of the Beautiful.” She was Lady Katherine Lambton before her marriage, being a daughter of the second Earl of Durham, and sister of the present holder of the title. She married the Marquis of Carmarthen, eldest son of the Duke of Leeds, in 1884.

Walt Whitman, the American poet, has written the following brief ode to the new Brazilian Republic :

Welcome, Brazilian brother—thy ample place is ready;
 A loving hand—a smile from the North—a sunny instant hail!
 (Let the future care for itself, where it reveals its troubles, impedimentas,
 Ours, ours the present throe, the democratic aim, the acceptance and the
 faith);
 To thee to-day, our reaching arm, our turning neck—to thee from us the
 expectant eye,
 Thou cluster free! thou brilliant lustrous star! thou, learning well
 The true lesson of a nation's light in the sky
 (More shining than the Cross—more than the Crown),
 The height to be superb humanity.

The flag of the young republic is oblong, the colours being green and yellow. In the centre is a blue sphere, crossed by an oblique bar of white, on which is the motto, “Ordem e Progresso.” There are twenty-one stars emblazoned on the field, representing the twenty States of the Republic and the neutral municipality, Rio Janeiro. Among the stars appears the constellation of the Southern Cross, on the top right-hand corner of the flag.

London will soon begin to fill after the opening of Parliament on Feb. 11th, and even now town is by no means empty, owing to the numerous weddings coming off. I shall have some gossip for you in my next letter.

C. E. HUMPHRY.